

English Men of Letters

EDITED BY J. C. SQUIRE

WILLIAM BLAKE





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# WILLIAM BLAKE

BY

OSBERT BURDETT

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## PREFACE

ALL contemporary references to Blake, with one exception, and the subsequently printed sources on which Alexander Gilchrist based his *Life and Works of William Blake*, first published in 1863 and enlarged in 1880 Macmillan, are reprinted in Mr. Arthur Symonds's *William Blake*, 1907, Constable. The exception is the Life by Frederick Tatham which had previously been prefixed by Mr. A. G. B. Russell to his edition of Blake's Letters. The following is a list of the other principal books to be consulted :

1. *The Writings of William Blake*. Edited in Three Volumes by Geoffrey Keynes. Nonesuch Press, 1925.
2. *The Poetical Works of William Blake*. Edited by John Sampson. Oxford, 1905.
3. The Oxford Edition of *The Poetical Works of William Blake*. Includes the Minor Prophetic Books, and selections from *the Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. Edited by John Sampson. 1913.
4. *The Letters of William Blake, together with a Life by Frederick Tatham*. Edited by Archibald G. B. Russell. Methuen, 1906.
5. *The Works of William Blake : Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical*. Edited, with lithographs of the illustrated Prophetic Books, and a Memoir and Interpretation, by Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats. Three Volumes. Quaritch, 1893.
6. *The Paintings of William Blake*. By Darrell Figgis, with 100 Illustrations. Benn, 1925.
7. *William Blake*. Vol. I. Illustrations of The Book of Job, with a general Introduction by Laurence Binyon. 1906.

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8. *William Blake : A Critical Essay*. By Algernon Charles Swinburne. J. C. Hotten, 1868. New Edition, Chatto & Windus, 1906.

9. *The Real Blake*. A Portrait Biography. By Edwin J. Ellis. Chatto & Windus, 1907.

10. *Ideas of Good and Evil*. By W. B. Yeats. (William Blake and the Imagination, William Blake and his Illustrations to the Divine Comedy.) A. H. Bullen, 1903.

11. *William Blake*. By Basil de Selincourt. Duckworth, 1909.

12. *Art and Life*. By T. Sturge Moore. Methuen, 1910.

13. *Vision and Vesture : William Blake in Modern Thought*. By Charles Gardner. Dent, 1915.

14. *William Blake : Poet and Mystic*. By P. Berger. Translated by Daniel H. Conner. Chapman & Hall, 1914.

15. *William Blake : His Philosophy and Symbols*. By S. Foster Damon. Constable, 1924.

16. *The Followers of William Blake*. By Laurence Binyon, with a Frontispiece and 79 Illustrations. Halton & Truscott Smith, 1925.

17. *William Blake : His Life, Character, and Genius*. By Alfred T. Story. Sonnenschein, 1893.

18. *The Life and Letters of Samuel Palmer*. By A. H. Palmer. Seeley, 1892.

19. *The Life of John Linnell*. By Alfred T. Story. Two Volumes. Bentley, 1892.

20. *A Memoir of Edward Calvert*. By his third son [Samuel Calvert]. S. Low & Co., 1893.

21. *The Prophetic Writings of William Blake*. Edited by D. J. Sloss and J. P. R. Wallis. Two Volumes. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1926.

Other volumes and editions could be named, but here it suffices to mention the *Bibliography of Blake*, by Mr. Geoffrey Keynes, published by the Grolier Club of New York, 1921.

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## CHAPTER I

### BOYHOOD, 1757-1771

NEARLY one hundred years ago, in August 1827, confined to a couple of rooms in Fountain Court, an alley off the Strand, William Blake died unnoticed, save by a small but gradually extending circle of friends. They were young artists who revered him and regarded themselves as his disciples. The interest that Blake aroused in these, and indeed in all the finer spirits who chanced to discover, by more than hearsay, his character and his work, quickly began to be communicated to the world. In 1828, 1830, and 1832 J. T. Smith, Allan Cunningham, and Frederic Tatham published their recollections, the first short lives of the poet and artist. In the century that divides these enthusiasts from ourselves, this trickle of interest has grown into a stream, and not a year now passes without some new volume about him, while his rare, original productions are sought by libraries and museums all over the world. The canon of Blake's published writings is, even now, incomplete, and there is still a chance that some of his uncovered works may emerge from their oblivion. We have come to see in him a prophet of the nineteenth century; the precursor, independently of Chatterton and the Lake Poets, of the Romantic

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Movement ; the asserter of the principle of energy that is most valid in Nietzsche, whose mind and aphoristic manner of writing Blake's own curiously resemble ; the recoverer of the spirit of forgiveness that remains the peculiarity of Christ : a poet, an artist, a seer, and an eccentric, whose later writings tantalise their commentators from the obscurity that baffles the reason in its eager search for intelligible and apprehensible truths. A poet and a puzzle Blake is and will remain, and his reputation has gained rather than lost by its extraneous, non-artistic peculiarities. The imaginative resent the interest of the psychologist, and the psychologist deplores our ignorance of his ancestry.

Of the history of his family little is known. The parish registers, uncarthed by Mr. Arthur Symons, reveal that William Blake was born on November 28, 1757, and that he was the third child of James and Catherine Blake, who were then living at 28 Broad Street, Carnaby Market, Golden Square. These registers further show that the future poet had two elder and two younger brothers, and that both the second and the fourth were christened John. Mr. Symons, therefore, infers that the first John died before the age of five, and that his name was passed on to the fourth son, who, consequently, must be the John that Blake was to name " the evil one " in after life. The fifth son is registered under the name of Richard, and we are forced to identify him with Robert, Blake's favourite brother, a matter not difficult since J. T. Smith, in his *Biographical Sketch* published in 1828, states that he was familiarly called " Bob ", a nickname that may easily have replaced the baptismal one in the family circle. Bob would suggest Robert to posterity,

and even to the brothers who used it habitually. These five boys were followed by a little girl, Catherine Elizabeth. A table of dates will make the family clear.<sup>1</sup>

Very little has survived of his parents and his family history. There is no evidence for the envious suggestion that his father was an Irishman who changed his name from O'Neil to Blake on his marriage with a supposed Ellen Blake, or that the poet is connected with the family of the famous Admiral. Mr. Symons has discovered that the parish registers of St. James's, Westminster, in which church William Blake, though the son of a dissenter, was baptised, mentions "not less than nine families bearing the name of Blake", and it is natural to suppose that, like them, he was a Londoner with no recorded family history. Not even the maiden name of his mother appears to be known. His father, James Blake, a not too prosperous hosier, was a dissenter inclined to Swedenborgianism, who died in 1784 and was buried on July 4 in Bunhill Fields. His mother died in 1792 at the age of seventy. All that we know of them comes from our knowledge of the poet. Only their relations with him have preserved their memory.

When William Blake was a fortnight old his parents carried him to St. James's, Westminster, one of Christopher Wren's churches, where, with five other

<sup>1</sup> JAMES BLAKE—CATHERINE BLAKE.

James, born July 10, 1753.

John, born May 12, 1755.

William, born November 28, 1757.

John, born March 30, 1760.

Richard ("Bob"), born June 19, 1762.

Catherine Elizabeth, born January 7, 1764.



infants and at the Grinling Gibbons's font, he was baptised on December 11. In this year, too, Canova was born; his future friends, Stothard and Flaxman, were two years old, and Thomas Chatterton was a little boy of five at Bristol. The atmosphere of Blake's childhood is preserved for us in an anecdote recorded by the diarist Crabb Robinson, which tells us how in after life the poet's wife would remind him of his earliest vision. "The first time you ever saw God", she would say when her husband was describing his peculiar faculty, "was when you were four years old, and He put his head to the window and set you a-screaming". By the time when Blake was a child of eight his visions were becoming habitual, and in relating them he makes us acquainted with his parents in this, his earliest, collision with the world.

At that time Camberwell, Dulwich, Sydenham, and Newington Butts were still villages, and an active child who lived in Golden Square could quickly reach the open fields from London. On his return from one of these rambles Blake, says Tatham, ran home to tell his mother that he had seen the prophet Ezekiel under a tree, a vision that suggests the figures of whom his mother would tell stories to him. Though the good woman beat the boy for this assertion, and was doubtless scandalised that any of the prophets should be more real to her child than to herself, she seems to have felt compunction, for a year or so later when Blake came home from Peckham Rye with the news that he had seen a tree filled with angels, and his father was about to whip him for telling a fib, his mother interceded. On a third occasion, one bright morning in early summer, watching the haymakers at their

work, the child sees angelic figures walking among  
them. How this was received at home we are not  
told, but it is evident that both parents were growing  
aware of the boy's peculiarities and had begun to  
believe in some indulgence for him. Thus his father,  
Tatham records, refused to send him to school, having  
learned from experience how greatly a blow moved  
him to anger. There had probably been explosions  
at home, and his parents, having abandoned the rod  
themselves, and hesitating to punish him, did not care  
to entrust him to strangers who might be less patient  
than their puzzled selves. Imagination and the im-  
pulsive expression of feeling were probably the worst  
faults they had to find.

Blake's schooling, therefore, took place at home,  
where he learned to read and to write, but nothing  
more. His precocious poetry proves that these acquire-  
ments must have come easily to him, and with his  
active imagination, the green fields almost at his doors,  
the religious imagery of the talk of his father and his  
father's friends, we do not, at first, suspect that Blake  
needed other companionship or a schoolmaster. Yet,  
if he could learn some Italian (as he did in old age)  
and could pick up some French in his manhood, he  
could have learned Greek and Latin in his boyhood.  
The serious study of this literature and of the history  
that accompanies it might have given a valuable con-  
trast to the exclusively religious interests in his home  
circle. Another mythology, another set of symbols,  
would thus have been presented to his mind, which  
would have gained from the possession of two con-  
trasting visions of beauty. As things fell, the eccentric  
influence of Swedenborg was uncorrected by any other

standard of comparison. Blake's father suspected no loss in this for the future of his boy since reading and writing, all that he was taught, were sufficient to equip him for helping his elder brother in the shop, to which their father naturally destined the pair of them.

William, however, would draw and scribble on the backs of the customers' bills and make sketches on the counter; and it soon became a question whether he would make a good hosier and what to do with him if he would not. Allan Cunningham, who supplies these details, suggests the anxious discussions that went on, and the various sides taken by different members of the family, when he adds that the boy's love of art was "privately encouraged by his mother", and that "Blake became an artist at the age of ten, and a poet at the age of twelve". The order in which these two talents developed is significant. It should be remembered at the very beginning, before the time comes to contrast his achievements in art and in literature. The only formal instruction that Blake was to receive, moreover, was inevitably designed for an artist, not for a man of letters. Of his twin dispositions toward art and poetry, the artistic was cultivated, the literary left alone. His observation was fed by watching nature and men in the fields and in the streets; his imagination, already stimulated by these, was nourished by looking at pictures; his intelligence was aroused by religious discussion, heretical opinions, and the entirely uncritical reading of books.

According to Malkin, his favourite studies were "Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, *Turquin and Lucrece*, and his Sonnets", together with "Jonson's *Underwoods* and his *Miscellanies*". About this time

Blake probably began to write, but his tendency to draughtsmanship was even more precocious, and as there is no formal apprenticeship to letters, his father, who was becoming more resigned to Blake's evident desires, sent him at the age of ten to a drawing school kept by Mr. Henry Pars in the Strand. This decision had been confirmed from observing how the boy would spend his leisure. When he was not rambling in the country or reading at home, he would visit such private picture galleries as were open to the public, or attend auction sales of old prints at Longford's and Christie's. Longford, says Malkin, "called him his little connoisseur, and often knocked down to him a cheap lot with friendly precipitation. He copied Raphael and Michael Angelo, Martin Heemskerk and Albert Dürer, Julio Romano and the rest of the historic class, neglecting to buy any other prints however celebrated. His choice was for the most part contemned by his youthful companions, who were accustomed to laugh at what they called his mechanical taste." There was no one, alas, to criticise his father's literary models, and the severity of his own taste in design was the exact opposite of his taste in literature. He never changed either of these opinions. "I am happy", wrote Blake long afterward in his manuscript notes to Reynold's *Discourses*, "I cannot say that Raffaele ever was from my earliest childhood hidden from me. I saw and knew immediately the difference between Raffaele and Rubens." Blake made an idol of consistency, and thus hindered the development and sympathy of his mind. According to Gilchrist, the auctions permitted threepenny bids, and thus we know how Blake was accustomed to spend his pocket money.

The establishment of Mr. Pars was the recognised preparatory school for the Academy of Painting and Sculpture in St. Martin's Lane, an outgrowth of the Incorporated Society of Artists which Hogarth had helped to found. The Royal Academy itself was not started until 1768, a year later. William Shipley, the painter, had founded this preparatory school, and on his retirement Pars took it over because the art of chasing, to which, like Hogarth, Pars had been apprenticed, had fallen out of fashion. Thanks to the generosity of his younger brother William, a portrait painter much in request at the time, Pars had previously visited Greece to study its ruins. He returned with portfolios of drawings, which were doubtless instructive to the pupils in his school, and from the hints contained in them Blake probably won the precarious knowledge that he was to assume so confidently later. Mr. Pars's pupils were taught to draw from their master's plaster casts of the antique. There was no life class, and its absence, no doubt, led Blake's father to present his son with copies of the Gladiator, the Hercules, and the Venus de Medici, so that his son could continue his drawing at home. At the same time Blake was anxious to enlarge his little collection of prints, and, as his father gave small sums to him for this purpose, the boy had no further difficulties at home than were inevitable. His parents were encouraging and helpful once they had come to understand where his heart and talents lay.

From the age of ten to fourteen Blake remained with Mr. Pars, and out of school was busily occupied with drawing, collecting prints, and looking at pictures. He also read and had apparently begun to write verses.

The Advertisement to the *Poetical Sketches*, printed by his friends in 1783 and presented unbound to the young author to distribute as he liked, states that they contain "the production of untutored youth, commencing in his twelfth and occasionally resumed by the author till his twentieth year". At the age of twelve Blake had still two more years to remain at Pars's school, and the lovely song "How sweet I roam'd from field to field", which, Malkin says, was "written before the age of fourteen", must, therefore, have been composed during his schooldays.

If we accept this date, the song becomes the lyric of his childhood with its rambles and its visions, to remind us independently, like a second flowering, of the Elizabethan lyrics that the boy had been reading with delight. While the early works of genius are invariably inspired by memories, those of Blake emphasise how susceptible he was, and how important it was, especially for him, to fall under the best influences. He had, to an exceptional degree, the desire to surpass every one of his chosen models, and it is hardly too much to say that the influences that came his way were, for good and evil, the determining factors in his work. If his father had been a man with the taste of Lamb, and Swedenborg had been an accidental discovery, Blake's work might have been very different, for he had to the last the slightest of critical faculties, with a susceptibility that made him an easy prey to any influence from without. Under the spell of the Elizabethans Blake's early love of nature produced exquisite blossoms, and in his early poetry the nature that he came to suspect is found, if found transfigured. In his drawings, for which he went to school, a strict

tradition was controlling his exuberant fancy. In his writings, which were at the mercy of his boyhood's casual reading, his imagination at first sang to the traditional, though unfashionable, tune. When he outgrew this earliest influence, he had no standard but his own waywardness to guide him. He was at the mercy of his loneliness and chance, and thought that the best way to enforce his protest was to cherish and to emphasise his idiosyncrasies. Had he been born in the humanistic age, he would have allowed himself to be disciplined by a school sympathetic to his imagination, but finding himself a lonely voice he grew to insist on its peculiarities as if they were additional virtues. The result to literature, as we all know, was to be an outburst of experiment rarely successful for itself, if never to be neglected for its implications. Few men succeed in two arts. Fewer still have an equal capacity for two of them. When, like Blake, they happen to possess this dual faculty, it is not to be wondered that the better discipline of the two shall be the greater glory.

The *Poetical Sketches* show Blake at the only period of his life when he read books as works of art simply. Already this first artistic zeal was being definitely transferred to drawing, and left entirely to his own devices in his intellectual studies, for which the atmosphere of his home set the seal on peculiarity of opinion, he soon came to read only to confirm, and never to correct, his peculiar and dogmatic preferences. His voluntary apprenticeship to literature ended with his departure from Pars's school. After his boyhood was over, he read to justify visionary intuition, never to learn how best to reach his readers by communicating

his ideas in an apprehensible form. That in later life he sometimes wrote so well in spite of his vagaries, shows that, in circumstances more favourable to his development, he might have become of equal accomplishment in letters as in art had he been taught the art of writing as thoroughly as the art of design. It is his glory as a writer to have evoked the age of innocence and the dawn of reflection. His latest works were fated to be the monument of a genius in intellectual ruin, and perhaps it needed an intuitive energy as fierce as Blake's to remind the world that the excesses of insight and private judgment are no less disastrous than the formalism against which he was protesting. He was perfectly equipped by genius and study to write the *Songs of Innocence*. He was sufficiently equipped to divine the age of experience that lies immediately ahead. He was not equipped at all to create a new literary form for his profounder imaginings, and he remains a warning that genius itself which disdains the tools of tradition and all critical discipline is punished for its superbity.<sup>4</sup> To endeavour, as Blake was to endeavour, to make the sublime the foundation instead of the crown of poetry is to sacrifice the means to the end, to rebuild the Tower of Babel, and to incur the penalty of confusion. In place of the epic temple that he promised we have sublime ruins, only less artificial and picturesque than those visible erections which beguiled the fancy of ambitious noblemen on the country estates of his own time.

Even in the *Poetical Sketches* we observe a teeming and susceptible imagination already at odds with a fragile technique. Before his technique was overwhelmed by an urgent inner message, Blake's literary



gifts are at their nearest, short-lived moment of equipoise. Too familiar for their content, they may be studied briefly for their form, and for ominous indications of his later manner. Every characteristic of Blake's ultimate achievement in letters, his music, his magic, his flashes of imagination, his sudden insensitive lines, is somewhere or other to be discerned in them. In the earliest song to be approximately dated :

How sweet I roam'd from field to field  
And tasted all the summer's pride,  
Till I the Prince of Love beheld  
Who in the sunny beams did glide !

these last two lines are already a picture, a vision clear in outline which seems designed for such a draughtsman and engraver as the boy Blake was about to become. This pictorial quality is characteristic of all the *Poetical Sketches*. It is not merely that the metaphor becomes a symbol, but that the symbol is an image vivid enough to possess an independent life of its own. This song and its companions might almost belong to an Elizabethan song-book were it not for a mysterious gleam that makes the poem more than a song and less than a hymn by some supernatural note of ecstasy. Already the Elizabethan directness, its natural innocence of eye, is shot with something from afar, an eerie hint of magic more subtle than the simpler wizardry of Spenser's time and without Donne's metaphysical grotesquerie. I find a suggestion of this transfiguration in the third stanza :

With sweet May dews my wings were wet  
And Phoebus fired my vocal rage ;  
He caught me in his silken net,  
• And shut me in his golden cage.

The enchantment here hints at more than the white

magic of childhood or Elizabethan fancy. It is a shadow in the sunlight of a mysterious presence from the void beyond his beams. The poet is already possessed, and distraught by a dæmon.

In form these stanzas are simple rhymed quatrains, but already the rhythm is felt like an eddy to waylay the simple current of the metre. "My silks and fine array" might have come from Shakespeare or Fletcher were it not for an ecstatic note that really suggests Chatterton and the curious recovery, by a later age, of an old manner imitated by a disciple. The *Mad Song* and its beautiful fellow :

Memory, hither come,  
And tune your merry notes :  
And while upon the wind  
Your music floats,  
I'll pore upon the stream,  
Where sighing lovers dream,  
And fish for fancies as they pass  
Within the watery glass,

suggest similar comparisons, with an intricacy, too, that is usually the sign of a recovered, not a simple original, form. Some impulse was astir at the time in the English imagination, for, though Blake could hardly have known of him before 1777, when he was twenty, we know that Chatterton also was possessed by it. His *Sing unto my Roundelay* might be its brother.

Chatterton had died in 1770, and the first collection of the "Poems supposed to have been written at Bristol by Thomas Rowley" did not appear till the twentieth year of Blake's life, by which time, as we have seen, according to the Advertisement to the *Poetical Sketches* printed in 1783, the contents of Blake's earliest book had been already written.

The songs "Love and Harmony combine", "I love the jocund dance" are full of a childlike simplicity, peculiar to Blake himself, an unspoilt modern child still living in Eden. In the songs "To Spring" and the three following seasons, we find his first experiments in unrhymed verse, perhaps attempted after reading Milton's preface, the faint irregularity of which, wavering now toward and now away from the normal measure, is captivating like a piece of music for its variation upon a never abandoned but continually modulated rhythmic strain. The opening line of the song :

O Winter, bar thine adamantine doors,

evokes another picture, scarcely needing Blake's graver to become an image visible to the eye. In the following stanza, again, the creature,

whose skin clings  
To his strong bones [and] strides o'er the groaning rocks,

is the father of all Blake's monsters, a monster invented by an engraver already in love with the muscular anatomy of Michael Angelo. These four songs pause at the end of each stanza. Each is a quatrain or sestet, and the effect of this pause is to make the absence of rhyme almost unfelt. "To the Evening Star" and "To Morning" are blank verse, with a magical lyric difference. The "lion's glare" first appears in the former, and the coming of the *Tiger* is foreshadowed in this song. Only "Fair Elenor" and "Gwin, King of Norway" suggest uninspired imitations. The admiration that Blake was later to confess for Ossian, who was given to the world in 1760, and the probable effect of Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*

(1765) need no more than passing mention. Save in these two pieces and in the imperfect burlesque in the current fashion, called "Blind Man's Buff", Blake's *Poetical Sketches* are beyond, rather than the product of, his age. In all the rest his genius is no less remarkable than such influence as can be attributed to the writers that he admired.

The Muse was growing weary of tripping to formal measures. She wanted to feel herself free from the apron-strings of the couplet, to play, to dance, to be enthusiastic once more. She envied the Elizabethans for their "barbarous" energy, for their adventurous spirit, for the easy grace of their songs, for their natural music, to which she turns as does the townsman when he leaves the dusty city for green hills. Between herself and the Jacobean singers, however, the Reformation had intervened, and she could not recapture the humanist delight in natural life, in the world that we know, in the simple pleasure of the healthy senses. The old order of belief had been invaded by doubts, by facts, by science, and the general disagreement that followed these innovations left the ego in much the same hesitations as that in which our first parents found themselves when they knew that they were naked, different from the beasts that perish, and watched by a mysterious monitor from the skies. Energy had been replaced by enthusiasm, and few any longer accepted delight in visible beauty as sufficient to stifle the desires of the heart. Merrie England had gone for ever, and men were finding a trouble in the soul, a trouble which bewitched the old refrains even when played by those who took most delight in them. How remote are Blake and Chatterton from the mental

repose of John Skelton ! How much less objective are they even in their most musical moods ! How the ego begins to cling to itself as the only certainty ! The desire to escape was the motive of the coming poetry, and so long as an escape was found the singer was content. Blake takes leave of the eighteenth century in the beautiful criticism contained in his own address " To the Muses " :

Whether in Heaven ye wander fair,  
Or the green corners of the earth,  
Or the blue regions of the air  
Where the melodious winds have birth ;

How have you left the ancient love  
That bards alone enjoy'd in you !  
The languid strings do scarcely move !  
The sound is forc'd, the notes are few.

We feel that " Blind Man's Buff " convinced Blake that he could do nothing with the eighteenth century couplet until he had transformed its pedestrian pace to a running rhythm, and changed its goal from prosaic reality to some Everlasting Gospel of poetic life. For that his time had not yet come. He is less unhappy in his " Imitation of Spenser ", though its second line :

Scatter'st the rays of light, and truth's beams,

might have seemed as rough to Edmund Spenser as we know its similars did to those who apologised for printing the *Poetical Sketches*.

The two songs which introduce us to " my black-eyed maid " are probably among the latest of the *Sketches*, for in these only love, or rather a boy's expectation of love from the companionship of woman, occurs for the first time. The charm of a boy and

girl friendship, the delight that comes of country walks together, is rendered in the lines :

So when she speaks, the voice of Heaven I hear ;  
So when we walk, nothing impure comes near.  
Each field seems Eden, and each calm retreat ;  
Each village seems the haunt of holy feet.

How boyish it all is : this romance that can flush with pleasure, but hardly stammer its greeting or good-bye ! There is as much inexperience as innocence in it, and we know it for the redeeming moment of the awkward age.

The attempt at drama in *King Edward the Third* shows that Blake had enjoyed the blank verse of Shakespeare. It suggests also that the discipline of drama, which he evidently found to be irksome, was precisely the kind of discipline that he needed at this stage. Had the drama appealed to him as much as the epic, tragedy as much as theology, Shakespeare as much as *Paradise Lost*, the prophetic books might have become more than a magnificent ruin. As things fell, Milton dethroned the influence of Shakespeare, to the loss of Blake and of posterity. It is also curious that much of the prose dialogue of *King Edward the Third* consists of blank verse printed without alignment, and that the concluding prose pieces, "The Couch of Death" and "Contemplation", are written in rhythmical cadence, and that in the last of them, "Samson", Delilah is spelt significantly Dalila, in Milton's way. The influence of the Authorised Version on the style of Blake, of the prophets on his thought, needs no emphasis, but when we shall come to consider Blake's religious ideas, and particularly the meaning of Christianity to him, it will be well to recall

that he followed Milton and not the Bible when he touched for the first time upon their common themes. In the manner of youth Blake revered private interpretations more than any other sources, and even Christ was to him an arch-rebel who must be worshipped anywhere except in a church.

Enough has been quoted to remind us of the promise, strictly incalculable, of Blake's first printed book ; enough to show that he was at the mercy of his influences. In beauty and strangeness and precocity only Chatterton, who died at the age of eighteen, can be compared with him. In precocity Chatterton surpassed him, because the Bristol boy was content with one art, whereas Blake was already deserting literature, almost as soon as he had proved his powers, for the drawings on which he must have spent the greater part of his time while at Mr. Pars.

## CHAPTER II

### APPRENTICESHIP AND MARRIAGE, 1771-1787

BLAKE left the drawing school at the age of fourteen to become formally apprenticed to James Basire, the engraver, and to adopt this profession as his own. It was during this apprenticeship, which enabled him to become an artist by providing him with a regular means of livelihood, that most of the *Poetical Sketches* must have been written ; but we have lingered over them already partly because the earliest were written at the drawing school, but mainly to infer what Blake's writings might have become had he followed his rival bent to poetry and literature. Writing now, however, is to become the private satisfaction of his leisure, and we turn to Tatham to learn how Blake arrived, and how he spent his apprenticeship, at Basire's.

“His love for art increasing, and the time of life having arrived when it was deemed necessary to place him under some tutor, a painter of eminence was proposed, and necessary applications made ; but from the huge premium required, he requested, with his characteristic generosity, that his father would not on any account spend so much money on him, as he thought it would be an injustice to his brothers and sisters. He therefore himself proposed engraving as



being less expensive, and sufficiently eligible for his future avocation. Of Basire, therefore, for a premium of fifty guineas, he learnt the art of engraving."

All idea of the shop had been abandoned, and, if we are to believe J. T. Smith, the boy had been "sent away from the counter as a booby". His father seems, nonetheless, to have put himself to willing trouble. First of all he took his son to Ryland, who introduced stipple to this country, and was then engraver to the king. Gilchrist says that Ryland was an accomplished and agreeable man, the friend of poets and various distinguished people. Blake, however, must have felt a distaste for his society, for on leaving Ryland's studio he remarked: "Father, I do not like the man's face; it looks as if he will live to be hanged." Twelve years later, after falling into difficulties, the artist committed a forgery on the East India Company and was condemned to the gallows. When Blake met Thomas Griffith Wainwright in later life, however, he did not recognise a murderer, so that the honours of the story must not be exaggerated. Blake's father fell in with the boy's wishes and took him next to James Basire. This James, the best known of four engravers, kept his shop at 31 Great Queen Street, and was retained professionally by the Society of Antiquaries. He was a man of fifty-one when Blake became his apprentice, and had been warmly esteemed by Hogarth among others. According to Gilchrist, Hogarth once declared that he did not know his own drawing of Fielding from Basire's proof. He had studied in Rome, and was particularly admired for his dry style, which no doubt recommended him to those, like the Society of Antiquaries, who were concerned with ancient monuments.

Indeed, Basire's chief patrons were antiquaries who had every reason to appreciate the precision of his plates, at a time when the softer tinted mode of Bartolozzi, useless for their purpose, was already coming into fashion. The severe practice of Basire taught and confirmed Blake in his insistence on strict form and severe outline in all drawing, though this is the very lack of which we have to complain in the poet's later work. Basire was a good teacher and a kind master, and the seven years that Blake spent with him were decisive on his art. Blake's exuberant imagination accepted this controlling influence, without which his execution might never have equalled his creative power of design.

The boy proved an apt and industrious pupil, who soon learned to copy to Basire's satisfaction whatever work he was set to perform. The shop, too, had its exciting moments, for it was frequented by all sorts of people, including, one day, Oliver Goldsmith, whose head fired Blake's admiration for many a day. Goldsmith did not die until 1774; and another visitor may have been Emanuel Swedenborg, who was then living in London, where he remained until his death in 1772. The sight of the famous novelist is the only external recorded incident of Blake's first three years at Basire's, but a casual occurrence of great importance interrupted his placid course after he had been working in the shop for two years.

There were, we are told, several apprentices beside Blake, and the harmony of the place depended on the ease with which the youngsters worked together. In 1773 two new apprentices arrived, who, according to Tatham, indulged in frequent quarrels with Blake

“ concerning matters of intellectual argument ”. These quarrels created disorderly scenes, and when, according to Malkin, Blake refused to side with his master against his fellow-apprentices, Basire’s kindly comment was : “ Blake is too simple and they too cunning.” In order to restore harmony without sacrificing either party, Basire sent Blake, whose industry could be trusted not to abuse the privilege, out of the shop to draw the Gothic monuments in Westminster Abbey and other old churches, monuments which Basire’s patrons, the antiquaries, were always wanting to have engraved. Blake would spend the summer making these drawings, and the winter sometimes in engraving them. Lost in the corners of these old churches, Blake’s romantic imagination was completely Gothicised, and for the future he closed his mind to every other influence or interpreted it by the light of these impressions, for which he had been unconsciously prepared by the religious atmosphere of his home.

We learn that “ the monuments of the kings and queens in Westminster Abbey which surround the chapel of Edward the Confessor, particularly that of King Henry the Third, the beautiful monument and figure of Queen Philippa, King Edward the Third, King Richard the Second and his Queen, were among his first studies. All these (Malkin continues) he drew in every point he could catch, frequently standing on the monument and viewing the figures from the top. The heads he considered as portraits ; and all the ornaments appeared as miracles of art to his Gothicised imagination. He then drew Aymer de Valence’s monument with his fine figure on the top.”

We have only to imagine Blake transplanted from

Westminster Abbey to the ruins of the Parthenon, walking the road to the Piraeus, and apprenticed at the same age to a sculptor occupied in classical studies, to see a different development for him, and to admit that his future was as nearly now a foregone conclusion as that of any boy of genius can be. As it was, Blake never met a man with feelings as ardent as his own who was not some sort of eccentric, a heretic, a revolutionary, an astrologer. No humanist ever came his way, and the tameness of the one poet with whom he was to be thrown continuously in contact led him to make an idol of idiosyncrasy.

Except for his boyish acquaintance with Jacobean poetry, with the antique casts from which he had learned to draw at Mr. Pars, the youth of Blake was untouched by romantic or theological influences. Because, in a word, the romantic was congenial to him, he could well afford to have been crossed with classical and humane traditions. It is opportune to consider what the effect might have been if the example of Michael Angelo had been succeeded, not by Gothic, but by the Greek masters through whom Michael Angelo himself was largely inspired. In the sunlit spaces between the columns of a Greek temple, in the open-air life that the Greek statues reflect, Blake's visions would have assumed a very different form from that imposed by the shadowy interior of Gothic churches. The figures that people their gloom are like ghosts in a cavernous Hades, while the gods and heroes of classical sculpture have the happiness of health and the vigour of sunlight as they stand and not recline upon their plinths. The designs of Blake wanted the classic foundation, and his writings entirely

missed the lucid beauty of classical literature, which he came, indeed, to identify with the academic art that he despised. There is no classic form in romantic literature, though in romantic art the Gothic severity came near to taking its place. Circumstances led Blake to follow his line of least resistance, and in the Abbey, where, Malkin tells us, he became "almost a Gothic monument himself", he was completely absorbed.

Even in these precincts, however, the interruptions that he had encountered in the shop were not banished, for, though Blake was free from his apprentices, the Westminster schoolboys would intrude. Tatham says that "in the impetuosity of his anger, worn out with interruption, he flung one of the boys from a scaffolding", and followed this by laying a formal complaint before the Dean. It is through this boy and Blake's complaint that the Westminster scholars of to-day are excluded from the Abbey. The dreamer proved himself a true mystic by this act, for exceptional insight and decisive action are the combination of qualities by which the great mystic is known. The contradiction is sometimes so startling that the lives of the great mystic puzzle those commentators who have not this peculiarity for their key. The wrath of the lamb is the terrible manifestation of righteous anger in a heart of gentleness and peace.

All his life long Blake remained grateful to Basire for the gift of his freedom, not only when at work in the Abbey but on expeditions to the Gothic churches in and near London. He found in their stone monuments not only "form and outline" for his art, but a mythic English history, a symbolic language, and the

place that colour once had played in architectural sculpture. All these, the colour too, probably suggested the synthetic art that he, too, was later to create in his Illuminated Printing, wherein poetry and design, handicraft and paint, were to evolve a new form of book by a new type of author : one who was to conceive, combine, and himself carry through every detail of the finished work. No place less splendid or mysterious than the Abbey was to be Blake's private studio. Shut in there alone, month after month for five years, undisturbed even during the services, for at these times and in the intervals of visitors "the vergers turned their keys upon him", Blake's boyish hand was ever busy, while a throng of thoughts pressed into every unoccupied corner of his mind. His visions returned, the statues and figures seemed to come to life. It was in the Abbey that Christ and the apostles appeared to him, and the Gothic imagination itself seemed to return to life in the boy. The monuments that he went to sketch suggested to him the visions that had filled the minds of the original builders and sculptors. The figures became less his subjects than his friends ; with their shadowy companionship his imagination was peopled. His mind teemed with ideas that took the likeness of the statuesque figures about him, and the men in the world outside to which he returned became the shadows of the sculptures, unreal intruders into the solitude in which he lived.

The result was that his brain and imagination became another Abbey, as remote from those of his neighbours as is the ancient building from the modern life without its walls. No boy so susceptible has been exposed in his impressionable years to such an influence, and it

led Blake to make a religion of Gothic art and to see in Christ and his apostles artistic rather than religious symbols. In this way he reversed the process by which Christian art had been created, and without any intellectual basis for his reason he sought to interpret the Christian tradition solely by the works of art that it had inspired. A Christian by profession, he never went to church, and at the last conceived a scripture peculiar to himself and composed of fragments that had little bonds but the caprice of his ingenious prejudices. Approaching religion through the art that really occupied him, Blake was induced to supply from his own mind the basis that the medieval workmen had inherited, and it becomes a question whether Blake, had he been exposed to secular artistic influences, would have preoccupied himself with religious terms. His active mind was besieged in his boyhood by the symbolism of the Abbey, and it is to his lonely hours within its peopled walls that we can trace the origin and leanings of his later mysticism.

His leisure was occupied with the continuation of these studies, with engraving his drawings of saints and medieval kings. One of the great number made at this time has survived. It represents Joseph of Arimathea among the rocks of Albion and is dated with the words: "Engraved by William Blake, 1773, from an old Italian drawing, Michael Angelo pinxit." Already one of Blake's characteristic comments appears on the plate: "This Joseph is one of the Gothic Artists who built the Cathedrals in what we call the Dark Ages, wandering about in sheepskins and goat-skins, of whom the world was not worthy. Such were the Christians in all ages." This is an extraordinary

revelation of the state of Blake's mind in his sixteenth or seventeenth year. It was never modified by a sense of proportion later, and when we compare it with his mature utterances we see that his mind remained to the end furnished with the imagery that his occupation of the Abbey in his boyhood had impressed. The Gothic artists were the only historical heroes that Blake's imagination knew.

In Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments*, one of Basire's commissions, we may trace Blake's engraving at this time. Gilchrist, following Stothard, confidently attributes to Blake's hand the "Portrait of Queen Philippa from her Monument", though it is, of course, signed by Basire. In his *Public Address*, to be issued many years later, Blake mentions the rival engravers that he used to meet at this time in Basire's studio. To the last a believer in his master's severe method, the seductiveness of the softer school remained abhorrent to him. He insists that "engraving is drawing on copper and nothing else", and his fierce criticism of Basire's colleagues may be illustrated by his remark on one. "Woollett I knew very intimately by his intimacy with Basire, and knew him to be one of the most ignorant fellows I ever met. . . . He has often proved his ignorance before me at Basire's by laughing at Basire's knife tools, and ridiculing the forms of Basire's other gravers, till Basire was quite dashed and out of conceit with what he himself knew. But his impudence had the contrary effect on me." Blake was defending what he believed to be the principle of drawing, and we shall observe how the representation of natural effects was to seem to him the death, instead of the discipline, of imagination. Saturated with the



conventional sculptures of the Abbey, he desired the transfiguration of natural forms, and stored, as his own mind had become, with art rather than observation, he began to conceive in the Gothic manner, and from this to infer that all intuition came in the shape of Gothic images, which it was the failure of an artist not directly to transcribe. He was like a townsman who had never seen the country except in landscape pictures. The shape in which Blake's visions came to him was obviously Gothic, but so deep, and therefore so unconscious, was this influence that he believed all visions had come to men in the same guise, and that Nature herself could be a vision was the gravest of errors. It is true, of course, that to all mystics nature is the myth or reflection of a beauty that does not belong to the visible world, but it is extreme to say, as Blake did, that to represent nature in art is to be busy with the letters at the expense of the imaginative meaning. ¶ To assert that conventional foliage is necessarily more beautiful than a living leaf is to root up art from its foundation, to derive inspiration from previous art or from an individual mind, and when the theory becomes an obsession even formal beauty is imperilled. ¶

When Blake's apprenticeship to Basire came to an end in 1778, he went for a time to study in the antique school at the Royal Academy. His teacher there was old Mr. Moser, its first keeper, a chaser medallist and enamel painter, who had been in charge of the parent schools in St. Martin's Lane. In one of his later annotations to Reynolds's *Discourses*, Blake records one of their conversations: "I was once (he says) looking over the prints from Raffaello and Michael Angelo in the Library of the Royal Academy. Moser came to me

and said, ' You should not study these old, hard, stiff and dry, unfinished works of art. Stay a little and I will show you what you ought to study.' He then went and took down Le Brun and Rubens' *Galleries*. How did I secretly rage ! I also spoke my mind ! I said to Moser, ' These things that you call finished are not even begun : how then can they be finished ? The man who does not know the beginning cannot know the end of art.' " Blake was content to draw from the antique, but, very characteristically, he found the living figure too natural. "The Abbey became to him that which the palaestra had been to the Greek sculptors. " Already his imagination could feel free only when it was working at one remove from reality. Thus when Malkin tells us that Blake " professed drawing from the life always to have been hateful to him ", and spoke of it " as looking more like death or smelling of mortality ", we can understand how this fatal prejudice had lodged itself in his mind. He seems more reasonable when he says : " Practice and opportunity very soon teach the language of art. Its spirit and poetry, centred in the imagination alone, never can be taught ; and these make the artist." True enough, yet one of the most valuable opportunities that the imagination can have is the study of the natural form that Blake despised. He carried his recoil so far as to confess that " natural objects always did and do weaken, deaden, and obliterate imagination in me ". Haunted by the forms of the Gothic sculptors, and identifying these with the religious ideas that had given them birth, Blake resented living realities as intruders, and refused to admit the criticism that they offered of the conventional images that exclusively

occupied his mind. A water-colour drawing made at this time, "The Penance of Jane Shore", was included by Blake in the exhibition of his works held in 1809. A note in the *Descriptive Catalogue* says of it: "This drawing was done above thirty years ago, and proves to the author, and he thinks will prove to any discerning eye, that the productions of our youth and of our maturer age are equal in all essential respects."

Meantime Blake was beginning to earn his living by making engravings for Harrison, Johnson, and other booksellers. He engraved designs for their books and magazines. The most important were eight plates after Stothard for the *Novelist*. Blake became acquainted with Stothard in 1780, and by him was introduced to Flaxman. It was with Flaxman that Blake went yachting and sketching on the Medway, as far as Upmore Castle, some time between 1780 and 1782. Mrs. Bray, in her *Life of Stothard*, tells how the members of the party were mistaken for French spies, supposed to be map-making, were then arrested by soldiers, and only released when the Royal Academy identified them. A third friend made in this year was Henry Fuseli, an idealistic painter who had been Lavater's schoolfellow, and declared that nature "put him out"; and when he shortly settled in Broad Street, and Flaxman on his marriage moved to 27 Wardour Street, the three became neighbours. Gilchrist says that Blake needed such friends because "he was one of those whose genius is in a far higher ratio than their talents, and it is talent which commands worldly success". The inference is not so prosaic as it sounds. We have Mr. George Moore's authority for saying that "genius without talent can only totter

a little way". Blake "loved laughing", but he had little sense of humour, and virtually no critical intelligence. His hand was much better cultivated than his head, and in but few of his writings is there a line of mental laughter, usually the flower of observation delighting in the criticism that nature and behaviour passes upon our ideas. In this same year, 1780, Blake first exhibited at the Royal Academy. His picture was a water-colour of the "Death of Earl Godwin". It was the year of the Gordon Riots, and one day walking in the streets Blake was swept along by the mob and witnessed the burning of Newgate, but though he occasionally said severe things about the Latin Church, he did not identify himself with the No-Popery cry of the London agitators. He was beginning to be busy with the painting of water-colours, and with tempera on canvas, a modification of which he came to christen fresco.

He was now a young man in his early twenties, and his first youthful love affair seems to have been with "a lively little girl" called Polly Wood. She was ready to go for walks with him, but when he mentioned marriage she refused. Blake was not the only feather in her cap; she liked young men's society, but was by no means sure that the time had come to commit herself definitely to any of these admirers. When Blake was simple-minded enough to complain that she also kept company with others, she was astonished at his seriousness, and asked him if he was a fool. He used to say, in his bold manner, that this question cured him of jealousy for ever, but at the time he was greatly upset, and felt so ill that he went, according to Tatham, for a change of air to Kew. It was, in fact,

to Battersea, where he stayed with a market-gardener, Mr. William Boucher. Blake, who was badly in need of sympathy, was ready to confide in the first compassionate ear, and he found in the market-gardener's daughter a willing listener. He told Catherine why he had come to Battersea, and she heard his story with such affectionate interest that he was completely won. Tatham, who tells the anecdote, was very intimate with the Blakes in later life, and there is no reason to doubt his statement that the two young people made a great impression upon each other. Catherine Boucher had a different temperament from lively Polly Wood. She was a demure young woman who did not run after the men, and when her mother would ask her which of her acquaintances she would fancy for a husband, Catherine would reply that she had not yet seen the man. This was her state of mind when Blake suddenly appeared at Battersea, but she afterward related that when she first came upon Blake sitting in her house, she instantly recognised her future husband, and so nearly fainted that she left the room until she had recovered herself. In this condition his story made a profound impression. When Blake saw how affected she was, he asked in his impulsive way: "Do you pity me?" "Indeed, I do," she answered. "Then I love you," he said, and so it was settled between them.

They were married on August 18, 1782, in St. Mary's Church at Battersea village, after Blake had returned to London to work until he had enough money to provide his wife with a home. The suggestion of Tatham that Blake had resolved not to see her until this was accomplished explains the year that elapsed between his visit to Battersea and his marriage.

Gilchrist asserts that he has traced kinsmen of Blake's father in Battersea, but Mr. Symons gives evidence from the registers of both parishes to suggest that there were Bouchers both in Battersea and in Westminster. If so, some of Blake's neighbours may have proposed that he should visit their namesakes in the village.

Catherine Boucher, like many brides of her day, signed her name on the register with a mark. There were no national schools at this time, and even regular Sunday schools had not been invented. She had nothing to unlearn when she came to her husband, unless it were some puritan prejudices. He taught her all she ever knew, but she brought to him a slim figure, dark rich eyes, a warm heart, and a loyal affection. Mr. Symons thinks that she was the model for her husband's "invariable type of woman, tall, slender, and with unusually long legs", a sufficiently fascinating description. Crabb Robinson, who met her two years before Blake's death, also spoke of her "dark eye", "good expression", and the remains of youthful beauty. The verses in the *Poetical Sketches* about the dark-eyed maid were written five years before Blake met Catherine Boucher, but they occur often enough to suggest a preference that was to remain with him. There is no question of the happiness of his marriage, or of the singular devotion of his wife. He taught her to read and write, to draw, to help him to print, and even to colour his engravings. Like that of many wives, her very handwriting resembled her husband's. She was his complement in every way, and as obedient as he was imperious. "It is quite certain", Crabb Robinson says, "that she believed in all his visions." He filled her horizon, and she saw the world through

his eyes. According to Gilchrist, " she would get up in the night when he was under his very fierce inspirations, which were as if they would tear him asunder . . . and so terrible a task did this seem to be that she had to sit motionless and silent : only to stay him mentally, without moving hand or foot. This for hours, and night after night." Tatham is the source of this description : " While she looked on him as he worked, her sitting quite still by his side doing nothing soothed his impetuous mind ; and he has many a time, when a strong desire presented itself to overcome any difficulty in his plates or drawings, in the middle of the night, risen and requested her to get up with him, and sit by his side, in which she as cheerfully acquiesced."

Blake was twenty-four and Catherine twenty at the time of their marriage, and, possibly because it was not welcomed by his father, their first home was not with the hosier but at 23 Green Street, Leicester Fields. Hogarth had lived in Leicester Fields, which was an artists' quarter, for the Blakes had a neighbour in Sir Joshua Reynolds. The young couple had a much rougher path to tread, but luckily for both of them Mrs. Blake was one of those reliable, sympathetic, and adaptable women who will second their husbands at whatever work they may set their hearts upon. Tatham tells us that she was a good cook, and a careful housewife who " did all the work herself, kept the house clean and tidy, besides printing all Blake's numerous engravings, which was a task sufficient for any industrious woman ". In addition to all this, Mrs. Blake had to adapt her ideas and behaviour to those of a man extraordinary in any age and wholly new to her own experience. We can well believe, without the hints

to be found in the poetry that Blake composed in the early years of his marriage, that this was not the least exacting call upon her character. It was, no doubt, also the one of which Blake was at first the least conscious himself. • The contrast between the two is apparent in their countenances and physique : she slim, dark-eyed, maternal ; he, in Swinburne's summary of several contemporary descriptions, with " the infinite impatience of a great preacher or apostle ", showing " intense, tremulous vitality, as of a great orator, with the look of one who can do all things but hesitate ". How was a woman of Catherine's placid nature to become, as she did, a responsive companion to such a man ?

They were not left entirely to themselves, for Flaxman, the sculptor, was not only near by in Wardour Street, but he had many friends of his own and was eager to introduce Blake into this more fashionable circle. It was he who took the Blakes to the drawing-room of the accomplished blue-stockings, Mrs. Mathew, the wife of the Rev. Henry Mathew, then living in Rathbone Place, where their house was much frequented by literary and artistic people. The Mathews were a cultivated, genial pair, the smiling centre of a little select world, and ready to be kind to all who seemed worthy of admission to it. Like most of their type they confused benevolence with insight and were far more strict than they supposed in their liberal ideas. The helping hand that they were ready to extend did not really encourage independence, and suitors for their favour had to conform to the real, if scarcely visible, yoke of their polite patronage. They must have been very proud and pleased when they



reflected on the accomplishments of each other. Mr. Mathew is said to have "read the church service more beautifully than any other clergyman in London". He had also discovered Flaxman as a little boy learning Latin behind his father's counter, and had held out a helping hand to him. Mrs. Mathew in turn became the sculptor's friend, and would read Homer to him while he made designs on the table at her side during these voluntary lessons. She was well versed in Greek and Latin, and fully able to hold her own with such learned ladies as Mrs. Montagu and Mrs. Carter. These hostesses held conversaziones at their houses, and were anxious to show that scholarship could be pursued without impiety. They were the first to desire equal education for their sex, and from their discreet beginnings the independent modern woman has grown. The foibles of these ladies are more famous than their enterprise, but there are worse ambitions than the desire to be a wife fit for men like Horace Walpole. Mrs. Mathew looked to Flaxman to help her to realise her taste in decoration, and the result of their joint endeavours was the conversion of one of her rooms into a Gothic chamber. The feeling for Gothic was in the air, and Mrs. Mathew must have seemed to Flaxman the one person likely to advance and appreciate his friend. A lively picture of these blue-stockings is given by Mr. Charles Gardner in his volume *William Blake : the Man*.

Blake was soon made welcome at the Mathews', and he would enliven their parties, according to Smith, by reading and singing his own verses. Although without training in music, Blake apparently set his songs to airs which he repeated by ear. Smith declares that these

airs were sometimes "singularly beautiful", and that they were even noted down by musical professors, for musicians, too, were invited to the Mathews's house. None of these notations has survived, but their existence proves Blake to have been a complete artist, since he would sing, set his songs to his own settings, and was soon to print, bind, and publish his own books. He is said to have died singing, and he suggests the Bard of whom he wrote more justly than any modern poet. He was considered at first a great acquisition to the Mathews, but their invitations must have been a doubtful pleasure to Mrs. Blake, whose simplicity could not compete with their sophistication. The poem entitled "Mary" in the *Pickering MS.*, though the date of its composition is conjectural, has been thought to give a picture of her difficulties at this time. She must have been shy, and may have been awkward, and it is only too probable that she was snubbed by some of the company. Blake may not have guessed the extent of her mortification at the time, but when he, too, recoiled from the polite world it probably gave an edge to the spleen that he vented. At first and on the surface all went well. The verses that he recited attracted attention, and Mrs. Mathew was successful in persuading her husband to join Flaxman in his generous offer to pay half the cost of printing Blake's poems.

In this way the famous *Poetical Sketches* by W. B. were presented to their author in 1783. They were neither bound nor published, and the author was free to dispose of them as he wished. Probably the discussions, the criticisms, and the apologetic Advertisement destroyed their flavour for him. Blake never took criticism kindly, and the volume remains a

curiosity to which the author showed as much indifference as the world. At all events some of his compositions had gone into print, and the experience probably encouraged him to continue writing, with the resolve in future to present his work in his own unaided way. Relations may have been strained over the production of the *Poetical Sketches*, but there was no definite quarrel, for, a year later, in 1784, after the death of his father, Blake moved to Broad Street once more, where, with the help of Mrs. Mathew, he set up as a print-seller in a house next door to his brother James, who continued to carry on the hosier's shop. A fellow-apprentice, James Parker, went into partnership with Blake, who was engraving after Stothard at this time. His first plate, "Zephyrus and Flora", after Stothard, was issued by the firm of Parker & Blake in 1784. The Blakes were joined in their new home by William's favourite brother Robert, who became a voluntary apprentice in the house.

A favourite relative or even a friend does not always add to the harmony of a married household, and Mrs. Blake comes before us again in an anecdote touching on this time. One day in the course of an argument with Robert, to which Blake was listening in tense silence, Mrs. Blake used words that seemed to her husband unwarrantable. Bursting into the discussion, Blake exclaimed: "Kneel down and beg Robert's pardon, or you never see my face again!" Mrs. Blake afterwards declared that she thought it hard to apologise to her brother-in-law when she was not in fault, but fearing her husband's impetuosity, she knelt and said: "Robert, I beg your pardon. I am in the wrong." "Young woman, you lie," Robert retorted;

"I am in the wrong." After this there is no hint that they were not good friends. It is probable, however, that this was not the sole occasion when Mrs. Blake had to bend to a domestic storm. From poems like that entitled *Broken Love*, Mr. Ellis has inferred that Blake's passionate nature at first shocked the modesty of his wife, and that the shrinking that he met led him to claim the patriarchal right to add a mistress to his household. Such a poem as "William Bond" must have had some foundation in fact. Mr. Ellis's interpretation is psychologically probable; Blake's criticism of priestly views of love and modesty enforce it, but the precise nature of what happened remains as obscure as all similar private histories, which, therefore, leave the world with little remedy for the ills of which everyone is surely but vaguely aware. Mrs. Blake was passing through a troubled time, and it is possible that she had no children because of some such crisis as "William Bond" records.

In 1785 Blake came before the public again with the exhibition of four water-colour drawings in the Royal Academy, and, perhaps feeling that he was beginning to find his own feet, he left off visiting the Mathews, whose society was growing irksome to himself too. His hosts and some of their friends began to complain of his "unbending deportment", or, as his adherents called it, his "manly firmness of opinion". Hard words have been given, at the safe distance of a century, to all Blake's patrons; even Butts faltered at last, but Blake was never a man easy to help, and the patron's task is proverbially exacting. The world does not sympathise with the artist, but not even the artist expects to be patient where his patrons are con-

cerned. Blake's irritation at the polite world that he had entered is reflected in a scurrilous work called *An Island in the Moon*. It seems to have been written in 1784, and is the first and longest of his grotesque explosions. Unfinished and unfinished, it has the inconsequence of Sterne without his humour. Except for its record of Blake's mental irritation at this time, its only interest is that the first draft of several of the *Songs of Innocence* is contained in it. One passage also hints at the Illuminated Printing, a mode of producing books that Blake was meditating at this time. He was further driven on himself by the illness of his brother Robert, whom he tended night and day during the last two weeks of an illness of which he died in 1787. As Robert breathed his last, Blake saw his soul rising into heaven and "clapping its hands for joy", after which, overcome with physical exhaustion, Blake took to his bed and slept continuously for three days and nights. This crisis left its imprint on his mind, for, relating his experience to the artistic project that he had in view, Blake declared that his brother appeared to him in a vision and directed him how to accomplish his design.

All ideas that came to his mind were converted into images, every event was changed into a drama, and as we listen to his words or meditate upon the anecdotes of which he was the hero, we seem to be studying the working of the human imagination itself. It is this that makes critical commentary seem irrelevant, for vividness of impression is the quality for which he was unique. To measure his experiences by the force with which they were conveyed is to mistake the quality of his genius.

## CHAPTER III

### THE LYRICAL POEMS

THE death of Robert was followed by a disagreement with Parker, and when the partnership was dissolved Blake gave up the house and business in Broad Street and moved to 28 Poland Street, Oxford Street, where he remained for five years. It was from here, two years after the death of his brother, that in 1789 Blake issued the *Songs of Innocence*, his first example of Illuminated Printing. This, like all Blake's books except the earlier *Poetical Sketches*, to be appreciated in all its beauty needs to be read in the original form in which it came from his own hand and press. Since this is not possible except for those who visit museum libraries, the method must be faithfully described. In the words of Mr. John Sampson : " The text and the surrounding design were written in reverse [a painfully laborious method], in a medium impervious to acid upon small copper plates about 5" by 3" which were then etched in a bath of aqua-fortis until the work stood in relief as in a stereotype. From these plates, which to economise copper were, in many cases, engraved upon both sides, impressions were printed, in the ordinary manner, in tints made to harmonise with the colour scheme afterwards applied by the artist."

The text and the illustration are thus interwoven into a harmonious whole, and as the colour can be varied no two copies need be exactly alike. Little but the use of a press distinguishes the books so made from illuminated manuscripts, and the etching in reverse together with the press makes the new method even more laborious than the old. The consequence has been that Blake has had no successors in the art which he invented, nor can his originals be copied without great difficulty and expense. Only those who have compared his originals with the printed pages in which his poems are ordinarily read are fully aware of the loss now suffered by his writings, which require to be read as much by the eye as by the mind on pages suffused with life and colour. Blake evidently adopted the method by preference and artistic choice, and because his hand could not write so much as a word without the impulse to trace designs upon the paper. He wished to indulge both his gifts at the same time, and did not marry them because he desired and could not find a publisher. The printed sheets of the *Poetical Sketches* no doubt seemed the death of form to him, and though he would use texts and phrases to decorate his later designs, it is significant that he would hardly ever write without engraving. He was always indifferent to a strictly intellectual appeal, and his writings invite rather artistic than intellectual criticism.

A necessary effect of the Illuminated Printing was to restrict his readers to the few, in the manner of an artist who displays not books but pictures. Blake often painted in words, and should be judged rather as an artist than an author. Mr. Sampson does not think it probable that "the whole impression of the *Songs*

issued by Blake exceeded the twenty-two " that he describes. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Blake's writings were little known. Absorbed in his invention, however, Blake eventually issued from Lambeth a prospectus defending his method and advertising the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience* at five shillings each : " If a method (he thus wrote in 1793) which combines the Painter and the Poet is a phenomenon worthy of public attention, provided it exceeds in elegance all former methods, the author is sure of his reward." As Mr. Symons has said : " Had it not been for his lack of a technical knowledge of music, had he been able to write down his inventions in that art also, he would have left us the creation of something like a universal art. That universal art he did, during his lifetime, create ; for he sang his songs to his own music ; and thus, while he lived, he was the complete realisation of the poet in all his faculties, and the only complete realisation that has ever been known." His combination of talents is his real defence against particular criticism.

What can be well said of the *Songs of Innocence* that has not been said well by other poets ? Till lately only men of genius busied themselves with Blake ; theirs is the prerogative of praising, and there is now presumably no reader of poetry who does not know the most exquisite section of his verse. The boy who had written the *Poetical Sketches* was already a precocious artist. The imagination of the man who wrote the *Songs of Innocence* had not outgrown the simplicity of the child. Blake might be an inspired child, writing for children, and these songs are nursery rhymes of pure poetry which children and their elders can equally



love. Such sources as have been suggested for them, for example the *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* by Dr. Watts, only emphasise the transforming power of Blake's touch. The real excuse for looking for sources is that Blake had an extraordinary temptation to surpass any influence that came his way. Later in life, and much against the grain, he surpassed even Hayley in the art of complimentary letters. It would, then, be a curious paradox if songs that seem the very rill of poetry issuing from the mouth of the Muse herself should have had an accidental origin. It is just possible that the title may have been inspired by a casual memory, but with the verse of the *Poetical Sketches* before us it would be absurd and uncritical to derive them from anywhere but the author of the earliest poems. He had shown that he could rival the Elizabethan lyrists, that he could transmute nature into the spirit of the earth, and from first to last the imagination itself was his principal and characteristic theme. In these songs Blake sings neither of love, nature, religion, nor sorrow, but of the imagination which, to be communicable, sees itself reflected, especially on the faces of children, in experiences such as these. The lamb, the shepherd, the infant, the cradle, the laughter of childish voices at play, are pretexts for a music as fresh, tender, awkward, soothing, merry as their original selves. For the first time in nursery poetry we feel that the grown-ups are listening, and that it is the child who is telling its mother about the lamb and God. The way in which the simplicities of feeling are conveyed and false sentiment avoided is miraculous. There is nothing quite to equal "Infant Joy" anywhere :

“ I have no name :  
I am but two days old.”  
What shall I call thee ?  
“ I happy am,  
Joy is my name.”  
Sweet joy befall thee !

“ The Lamb ”, the “ Laughing Song ”, the almost monosyllabic lines to “ Spring ”, which seem as if they issued from a cradle, the lovely “ Nurse’s Song ”, in which the nurse becomes the eldest of her charges for a moment, and the voice of play seems naturally to sing, are absolutely childlike. All poetry becomes young again in them, and artless utterance for the first and last time finds its proper music. There are others, however, in which the poet allows a glimpse of his hand to appear, as in “ The Divine Image ” and the haunting stanzas to “ Night ”, which Swinburne declared to be of the “ loftiest loveliness ”. There are poems which tell stories and poems which speak of religion, taking a child’s feelings about sorrow and pain for their simple lessons. So finely are they adjusted to their end that we hardly know whether the mother or her infant is reflecting, and indeed the second childhood of humanity is the blessing of those who have children of their own and are not strangers to them.

Perhaps only a poet who had read no fine literature but as a child reads could have written such things. There is in them an innocence of heart that is not to be found in Shakespeare. A few have the quality of children’s hymns, in which God appears a really loving Father, and mercy, pity, peace, and love, the virtues of childhood at its rare best, become the lineaments of His “ divine image ”. The occasional moral, as at the

end of "The Chimney Sweeper", is transformed by the poetry into an exquisite platitude of the world, as this is represented to children in the school-room. Its presence is an abstraction of nurse and completes the nursery atmosphere. Note, too, that the shepherd, the sheep, the cradle, and the rest are nursery symbols, thus enabling Blake to pass from the lamb to "Him who bore its name" without any change of key. The emotions aroused by this poetry are instinctive and almost as characteristic of animals as of men. Indeed, it celebrates the life, motions, and feelings of all young things, with the apparent artlessness of a lamb's bleat or the cry of a bird, a baby's shout of astonishment or pleasure. By returning to these poetry seems to return to its own infancy, and the language is almost as free from meaning, apart from emotion, as a child's prattle.

Both meaning and observation, even of social life, appear in *Songs of Experience*, the companion volume of 1794, though not the next to be written. These darker songs, sometimes on the same themes, and the group often called *Ideas of Good and Evil*, or the *Rossetti MS.*, are a convenient bridge between the simple lyric poetry with which Blake began and the complex prophecies that were to follow. The scene tends to shift from the nursery to the school-room, from the green to the church, from the open country to the city. We pass from feeling to observation, and the poems that touch on love reveal its troubles. Jealousy and prohibitions, whether personal or ecclesiastical, are named in them. Mr. Ellis has reconstructed a situation that would explain the references to those who are curious of Blake's erotic life. The famous

*Tiger* is of course here, and with Mr. Sampson's aid we can trace every variant in its gradual composition. The number of revisions reminds us of the care that Blake would still spend upon his form, and which he claimed to have spent later on his prophecies, where the ending of his lines can, in fact, be shown to depend upon the decoration surrounding them. In his own work poetry was to yield to decoration, and there can be no doubt that design was the principal preoccupation of his mind. The first ecstasy of conscious life is complicated with a growing knowledge of good and evil, and the music of the verse will bear the burden of this trouble without caring to assign a cause. Such lines as :

Ah, sun-flower ! weary of time,  
Who countest the steps of the sun,

are the music of heaviness of heart, as the lines to the lamb and the infant had been the music of gladness. When he observes his fellow-men fallen into the bonds of cold reason and dull experience, he wonders

How can the bird that is born for joy  
Sit in a cage and sing ?

And he finds the explanation not in their circumstances but in themselves :

In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every Infants cry of pain,  
In every Infants cry of manacles I hear.

All forms of external control were to Blake the enemy of imagination, and he was right in so far as the dictates of wisdom even have little use for us until we have made them by personal experience our own. All the rest is morality, which, so long as it remains repressive

and external, is always accompanied by secret satisfactions and deceit. In the age of experience, as Swinburne finely puts it, "inspiration shall do the work of innocence", and the "Introduction" to the *Songs of Experience* tells us that it is by listening to the Voice of the Bard that innocence can be renewed. It is, in fact, the inspiration to be derived from Blake, and not the particular instructions in which he sometimes phrased the call, that we should take from him. The loved disciple is not he who slavishly mimics any master, but one who by embracing his master's example is inspired to make the most of his own gifts and to follow the way of his own understanding. The best of the second group of songs present us with rudiments of thoughts dissolved in music, and it is the strange magic of this music, by leading us to think for ourselves, that we should carry away from them. Their intellectual fascination consists in suggesting rather than in defining their meaning. They make the intellect a thing of beauty by lending it the twilight that it should not possess, and the commentators, like bats awakened by the falling shadows, find in the gloaming the opportunity for the most crooked of their flights. Blake loved to put his feelings into intellectual forms, but he is really great when he is content with imaginative images, and can haunt our imaginations with lines like :

When the stars threw down their spears  
And water'd Heaven with their tears.

• The lost traveller's dream under the hill.

Nor is it possible to thought  
A greater than itself to know,

or the splendid :

For a tear is an intellectual thing,  
And a sigh is the sword of an angel king,  
And the bitter groan of a martyr's woe  
Is an arrow from the Almighty's bow.

All Blake's emotions, and many of his images, were "intellectual things" to him, but for the reader who would do the poet justice, it is the poetry and not the cloudy forms in which it is often presented that is the truth of Blake's writing. Here is the vital energy that was the foundation of Blake's creed, and for this essence to be separated and praised in poetry it was indispensable that it should not be limited to the very bonds and definitions that are more coherent than itself. Blake's way of attempting to defend intellectually a vitality that is its own defence has misled his less lyrical readers, who forget his relation to his age and the fact that he was protesting against an over-intellectual tradition. Law was his particular enemy, and to apply anything like logic to his lyrics, or to the lyrical prose that was soon to overflow them, is to confuse his tactics with his genius. Blake was to stand or fall by his own inspiration, and there are very blank lines here and there. The reader should not shut his eyes to them, though quotation would be ungracious, for they will lead him to study the almost verbal revisions of the *Tiger*, the only example we have of Blake's tireless revision of verse. That this was abundantly rewarded, and that Blake remained still to the end impatient even of self-criticism, shows how much his mind and work suffered from being always in revolt. His storehouse of ideas was the cosmogony.

which he had endowed with intellectual life and come to conceive the fathers and heroes of human history. We respect this for the fine courage in regard to worldly things that accompanied it, and still makes the home of Blake a sanctuary for those whose gifts are unwanted by the world. The following lines might have been written on any day of his long life, and since cheerfulness is the best evidence of courage, the courage of Blake is unusually moving in them :

For everything besides I have ;  
It is only for riches that I can crave.

I have mental joy, and mental health,  
And mental friends, and mental wealth ;  
I've a wife I love, and that loves me ;  
I've all but riches bodily.

So, as a church is known by its steeple,  
If I pray it must be for other people.

Here again Blake shows himself to be an artist in thought, delighting to tack an intellectual inference ~~to~~ to a state of mind, or rather of heart, that does not need it. All thinking had come to seem theological to him, and, with this qualification in mind, we shall not be misled by Swinburne's comment, really a witty one, that Blake "in his obscure way was always hurrying into the van of some forlorn hope of ethics". The other-worldliness of his mind is not only the privilege of a poet and a mystic but the legacy of a boyhood spent among the unearthly and sepulchral corners of an ancient Gothic church. Just as his writings are too much considered apart from the beautiful pages, which was a principal part of their beauty to himself, so his works and his intelligence are too much studied as if no peculiar influences went to his making, as if all

impressionable boys were brought up alone in the companionship of Gothic tombs. It becomes necessary and even refreshing to apply some of his aphorisms to himself. A favourite quotation from his "Gnomic Verses" :

Abstinence sows sand all over  
The ruddy limbs and flaming hair,  
But Desire gratified  
Plants fruits of life and beauty there,

should not only rejoice us with its splendid challenge but remind us of the many things from which Blake abstained : abstentions, part forced but part boasted, which choked even his lyrical intelligence with sand again and again. In the second half of the eighteenth century liberty seemed an end in itself, but its most ardent disciples were the first to learn, though they did not always admit, that it is another name for responsibility and depends upon as many voluntary checks as the external bonds that it overthrows. Blake was above his age, but the voice of his age can be heard distinctly in his challenging verses.

The note of compassion is no less remarkable in both of them. The songs on the sadder sights of London may have been occasioned in part by the talk that Blake heard at the Mathews', but there is no verse more poignant, even in Blake, than this :

Seek love in the pity of others' woe,  
In the gentle relief of another's care ;  
In the darkness of night and the winter's snow,  
In the naked and outcast, seek Love there. ❧

It seems to come from the heart of Christian charity, and the gaiety of goodness, the spontaneity of joy, is expressed in a perfect motto :



He who bends to himself a Joy  
Does the wingèd life destroy ;  
But he who kisses the Joy as it flies  
Lives in Eternity's sunrise.

All happy people live completely for the moment, and who does not remember with sacred delight the days when he played truant from school ? Blake was later to give a divine blessing to this spontaneousness by declaring that " Jesus acted from impulse, not from rules ". The whole art of keeping young is here, and if this is not cultivated so as to become a habit we are preparing for ourselves no memories beyond regrets. Unfortunately there are bad impulses, but their indulgence brings satisfaction, not joy, and Blake, like the rest of us, saw the world as his own reflection, and believed others to have been born as good as he. In lyrics like this last he does appeal to an active instinct as profound as our receptivity to beauty. He can quicken the pulse by something more than lyric life. These lovely lines to " Morning ", for instance, are content merely to call us out of doors :

To find the Western path,  
Right thro' the Gates of Wrath  
I urge my way ;  
Sweet Mercy leads me on  
With soft repentant moan :  
I see the break of day.

The war of swords and spears,  
Melted by dewy tears,  
Exhales on high ;  
The sun is freed from fears,  
And with soft grateful tears  
Ascends the sky.

What a landscape of light and mist and cloud is hidden  
in the intellectual image of the sun freed from fears !

Could there be a more characteristic example of Blake's intellectual alchemy? I have contented myself with such perfect things as these, for a long study of the interpretations of the admittedly difficult lyrics has left me convinced that no intellectual interpretation is satisfactory and that all attempts are much duller than the poems themselves. You cannot, I believe, recast the thought of a poet which is more than usually lyrical, which, indeed, is more truly a lyrical gift (disguised in intellectual terms) than thought, as it is found in certain of the poets, singing. Everything that Blake said he said with equal vividness, and the continually growing mass of commentary is threatening to overlay the lyric beauty which remains his final claim to a high place in English song.

It is with the "Everlasting Gospel", written much later, probably about 1810, but most conveniently to be considered among the lyrical poems, that Blake's mystical philosophy is most nearly married to his verse, and in taking it after the early poems, we must guard ourselves against overlooking the influences to which he had committed himself completely in the interval. There seems to be an increasing tendency to consider his writings apart from his life, as if he had devoted himself to mystical philosophy, and, no doubt, a few extremists will be found to assert that he did. The golden rule of criticism, that a man's life must be remembered when we would interpret his work, that his work will illumine the obscure corners of his character, is essential to the understanding of Blake. Criticism devoted exclusively to his books, or even to his designs, is barren, for his complex gifts were further complicated by his peculiar circumstances, his strange

upbringing, his natural recoil from his age, and the limited influences, which were all that his active imagination had to feed on. No one seems more original. No original mind was, in fact, so much at the mercy of its fate. To allow, even for a moment, his mental background and personal circumstances to slip out of our consciousness is to sacrifice the very foundation on which his peculiarities were nursed. The "Everlasting Gospel", then, is the poem of a peculiar mind which had experienced nothing to check and everything to encourage its singularity. Blake's only religious teachers were heresiarchs, and it became natural to him to identify good sense with idiosyncrasy, and to value his interpretation of familiar truths and figures in proportion as it was peculiar to himself. The life which Blake lived and recommended to men is that cultivation of personality that is instinctive in most artists, even in the articulate souls of the poets. No one had thought before of erecting this into a pseudo-theological system or of identifying it with the teaching of Christ. To say, as Blake did, that this is the only Christianity is, for example, to forget characters as diverse as St. Paul or a devout peasant, souls who have found religion in a very different view of Christ and the world. We must look in the "Everlasting Gospel" for what Blake found, not for *the* gospel which everyone but he had overlooked. Even more than commonly, the mind of the author of this poem is its true subject, and in it we study the effect of the Bible upon himself.

Like all Blake's challenging utterances, the couplets of which the "Everlasting Gospel" is composed contain a series of epigrams which defy systematic analysis since their object is to excite the reader by

creating lively impressions on his mind. Their virtue is to endue their subject with life and to recreate Christ in Blake's own image. The emotion aroused by the verse, which is always vivid and often beautiful, wears, indeed, an intellectual guise, but intellect was Blake's word for the imagination, and he awakens the feelings rather than satisfies the understanding. His purpose is to define Christianity as he had come to understand it after his study of Swedenborg and Milton.

We have had many studies of Christ in art and poetry, studies which have made the traditional Figure live again against the accepted background that we know. But where before has Christ been brought to the test of a purely artistic and imaginative intelligence, concerned only with what was most vivid in him, and entirely neglecting everything else? Hitherto art and poetry had been the handmaids of accepted theology even in Milton, in whose epic, however, the imagination began to break away and to make the Devil the real hero of the story. This departure fascinated Blake, and, as usual, he desired to surpass his model. Making, as his custom was, a rule of the exception, he declared that "Milton was a true poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it". From this witticism, which has its place when we recollect that Milton combined the puritan and the classical spirit in a fashion that remains a paradox until we remember too the circumstances of Milton's time, it was but a step to assert that the Devil's party was the true church, and the rebellious spirit the spirit of Jesus. The Poetic Genius became Blake's God, and our imagination became Our Saviour. By a sleight of hand the

Miltonic Deity is made to replace the Christian one, and Christ is shown defying not God but the world. It is sufficient to remark that the symbols have been shuffled, without pretending that the real points of either of his sources have been orderly preserved. Theologies were important to Blake only in so far as he could discern the spirit of poetry in them. The first step in his interpretation was to insist on its peculiarity. Thus he begins :

The Vision of Christ that thou dost see  
Is my Vision's greatest enemy :  
Thine has a great hook nose like thine,  
Mine has a snub nose like to mine :  
Thine is a friend of all mankind,  
Mine speaks in parables to the blind :  
Thine loves the same world that mine hates,  
Thy Heaven doors are my Hell gates.

The rest of the poem appropriates every incident of Christ's life and teaching which can be made to support Blake's belief in personality and impulse. A virtuous man is one who does not abstain from evil simply because he does not desire it ; whose love of the good and the beautiful is spontaneous and gives to all his words and actions a vivid freshness that is astonishing to ordinary beholders because, for the lack of it, they depend themselves on external precepts and laws. The good man influences his fellows less by what he does than by the spontaneousness which makes every action of his seem a new discovery, every word a surprise. In the " Everlasting Gospel " Christ is shown overthrowing all laws and moral judgements, indifferent to all virtues, because his healthy vitality justifies itself. The conventional picture of Jesus as " gentle " and " humble " is attacked in burning couplets, and here,

as usual, we have to remember that Blake was criticising the philistines by turning their favourite symbols upon themselves. Without the background against which he was protesting his flashes of lightning would lose the foil by which they shine. We are watching a thunderstorm not enjoying the sunlight :

God wants not man to humble himself :  
That is the trick of the Ancient Elf.  
This is the race that Jesus ran :  
Humble to God, haughty to man. . . .

If Thou humblest Thyself, Thou humblest Me.  
Thou also dwell'st in Eternity.  
Thou art a man : God is no more :  
Thy own Humanity learn to adore,  
For that is my spirit of life.

It is the reduction of the Three Persons of the Trinity to the Holy Ghost, and as all heresies resolve themselves into an undue emphasis on one Member of the Trinity, and as this particular heresy is rare, and tempts only those who are poetic geniuses, we can sufficiently define the limits of Blake's teaching and yet understand why it is more vivid and more congenial to poetry than any other.

The Romantic Movement insisted on the ego which Nietzsche was to idolise later. Therefore Blake goes on to define humility as "doubt", and doubt as "self-contradiction". The result is so stimulating, and the lines burn sometimes with such fiery beauty, that reflection on the quality of the surprise, the sufficiency of the stimulus, seems ungrateful. Yet it ought to be possible to enjoy the force of over-emphasis, as we can enjoy the form of keen invective, without pretending that the statements made really dispose of the matter. We have been so often offered stones for bread that

when Blake gives us yeast instead of loaves we are tempted to accept him as a baker. There is a fury in this gospel which signifies rather the cry of a persecuted man than the vigour of healthy teaching. The whole poem should be read as a lyric call to courage in the face of a heedless, loveless, and indifferent world. The well-known line, for example :

Thou art a man : God is no more,

is the extreme instance of Blake's subjective teaching. The gravity with which his gospel is received is partly to be explained by the general chaos of modern opinion, in which the most startling statements are welcomed because they give the desired contrast to the disillusion or indifference that abounds when there is no general agreement, and everyone is respected who can contrive to make himself heard. In this confusion phrases are remembered because they are violent, not cherished because they are true. Thought is weak to-day because there is little quietness or confidence in it.

Blake's teaching here is shown in something like true proportion when the individual applies it to others rather than to himself. If we see in it a warning not to break the wills of others, nor to impose our own likes and dislikes upon them, to hear always in it the cry of those to whom we are opposed, then the teaching falls into perspective. The poetry can be trusted to stiffen our courage, to strengthen our self-confidence, without any other aid. It is only when Blake is presented less as a poet and more as a philosopher that criticism becomes restive. Blake's peculiar magic was to stir the feelings when seeming to address the mind. His identification of "intelligence" with "imagina-

tion " is the clue. His own prose provides the best glosses on his poetry, and his axiomatic ideas are simple. " Energy is eternal delight "; " Good is the passive that obeys reason. Evil is the active springing from energy. Good is heaven. Evil is hell." Thus, taking a hint from Milton, and protesting as all mystics, including Bunyan, have protested that religion is not to be confused with morality, Blake asserted that the words good and evil had become attached to the wrong things, that the person of Christ was becoming revered for the very qualities that He had repudiated. To correct the error, and to affirm the irresponsible divinity of energy, Blake wrote the " Everlasting Gospel ". The poem ends, as it had begun, on a note of defiance :

I am sure this Jesus will not do  
Either for Englishmen or Jew.

This literary portrait is more alive than any since the portrait in the Gospels. Like them it has the vividness, with the incompleteness, of a sketch. It affects us as the miracles affected the apostles. It takes our breath away, and has the effect of making criticism seem uncritical.

Such poems as " The Mental Traveller ", while undoubtedly the work of a poet, are cloudy with the light that they do not disclose. Blake's imagination is seen here to be working with the instruments, but without the processes, of thought. When he is frankly nonsensical, as in " Long John Brown and Little Mary Bell ", oddly enough the imagination threatens to desert him too. The " Auguries of Innocence ", another series of couplets in the manner of the " Everlasting Gospel ", contain the famous quatrain :



To see a World in a grain of sand,  
And a Heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And Eternity in an hour.

Most of the ensuing couplets are proverbs in rhyme, and, like other proverbs, hit or miss a meaning at random, and it is as tantalising as it is irrelevant to look in most of them for more than challenging words. The nearest approach to sequence is contained in the concluding lines :

We are led to believe a lie  
When we see not thro' the eye,  
Which was born in a night, to perish in a night,  
When the soul slept in beams of light.  
God appears, and God is light,  
To those poor souls who dwell in Night ;  
But does a Human Form display  
To those who dwell in realms of day.

Blake was obviously rhyming for pleasure, and putting down any couplet that came to his pen. Inspiration without criticism is responsible for both the best and the worst. While he warned us of the insufficiency of the senses, he admitted the possession of first as well as second sight. On the physical plane he was no victim of delusion. As he wrote afterward in a letter to Butts :

For double the vision my eyes do see,  
And a double vision is always with me.  
With my inward eye, 'tis an old man grey,  
With my outward, a thistle across my way.

But in the sphere of apprehension he had no room for second thoughts. He did not distinguish between one inspiration and another, and thus there is a confusion in his apprehensions that finds no parallel in his practical life. Such a link as there is between the

couplets of the "Auguries of Innocence", which should be read first as it stands and then in Mr. Sampson's rearrangement, is evident from the opening proverbs :

A robin redbreast in a cage  
Puts all Heaven in a rage.  
A dove-house fill'd with doves and pigeons  
Shudders Hell thro' all its regions.  
A dog starv'd at his master's gate  
Predicts the ruin of the State.  
A horse misus'd upon the road  
Calls to Heaven for human blood.  
Each outcry of the hunted hare  
A fibre from the brain does tear.

It is the doctrine of correspondences, which is so instinctively accepted by mankind that even words of unreason suggest only subtler ramifications of it.

When we consider the body of Blake's lyrical poetry, we see that he desired a language that should lie on the further side of meaning, all music, all symbol, with none or the slightest foothold on the earth. Thought and meaning were to become wholly lyrical, and yet to use the language of ideas. So far as his aim was attainable by mortal man, he came nearest to it in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, songs which no doubt afterward seemed to him but feathers from the phoenix to be born from the ashes of the prophetic books. With the lyrical poems, and the tradition that they were content to work with, we leave the poet because he himself became desirous of something other than lyrical or even epic poetry could give to him.

## CHAPTER IV

### POLAND STREET AND THE EARLY PROPHECIES, 1787-1792

"THE SONGS OF INNOCENCE" were engraved two years after Blake, on the death of his brother and the dissolution of his partnership with Parker, had settled at 28 Poland Street. Mr. Sampson thinks that the two tracts *There is no Natural Religion* and *All Religions are One* were probably engraved in 1788, a year before. We know that while at Poland Street Blake composed *Tiriel* (1788), the *Book of Thel* (1789), the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and the first volume of the *French Revolution*. Before turning to these, which may be conveniently regarded as the earliest of the prophetic books, we need to picture Blake in his new surroundings, and to understand, as far as possible, the thoughts occupying his mind. Always highly susceptible to influence, he seems to have been started in this direction by certain books that came his way.

The year after Blake's arrival in Poland Street two books were published which lend some clue to the form and content of his subsequent writings. They interested him deeply, and his comments have survived. These books were the *Aphorisms* of Lavater and the *Wisdom of Angels* by Swedenborg. Copies of both books with Blake's holograph annotations still

exist, and his comments have more than once been printed. Both his authors were eccentric thinkers ; both interested in theology ; one had been ordained ; the other unintentionally founded the New Jerusalem Church ; and both had scientific attainments and mystical leanings.

A study of their works is sufficient to reveal their effect on the mind of the poet that we have been studying, and his instinct to carry further any model that appealed to his imagination warns us what to expect from these studies. They were the most unfortunate models for him that could have been found, and as he read them quite uncritically the result may be imagined. Blake's prophetic books became what they are through this disastrous contact with minds as eager as his own, but at least disciplined by active study. It was not the force of Blake's genius that impelled him to the form that his writings were now to take. It was its surrender to disastrous models. Lavater was a Swiss pastor, poet, and writer on physiognomy, an intractable individualist he has been called, the apostle of storm and stress, of fervour, genius, and idealism. His *Aphorisms* are of mixed quality and would not be of great interest to us now except that they suggested to Blake a similar gnomic form for his own challenging assertions. We doubtless owe to Lavater's *Aphorisms* the "Proverbs of Heaven and Hell" by which Blake is best known to other than professed students. The proverb and the epigram are always popular, though no one has learned wisdom by their means unless he has appropriated them to himself out of the depths of personal experience. There is something intellectually unfair about their use, for they leave us to discover

whether they are framing a rule or asserting an exception, and thus, as was observed by Jules Lemaître, they can never be proved to be wrong.

The early Swedenborgian influence that Blake had imbibed in his boyhood from his father and his father's friends was now to be enforced by a new work from this transcendental scientist. Mysticism and visionary insight were so native to Blake that he could not fall without danger into the hands of one who claimed a scientific knowledge of the spiritual world, and included all things in heaven and in earth in his system. His undeniable contributions to science, his habit of investigation, made Swedenborg an almost overwhelming influence to all who fell under his spell. He was so universal in his range and so minute in his particulars that he necessarily imposed an intricate symbolism as the indispensable form for intuitive ideas. Blake was a little recalcitrant to such evident supremacy, and his annotations to the *Wisdom of Angels* show him anxious to preserve his mental independence. He could never question without desiring to surpass, and the effect on his mind was to project a new cosmogony of his own. He was quite unfitted for the task, for he was not, like Swedenborg, an orderly thinker, and when an opponent of systems determines to create one, we seem to be watching the laborious creation of chaos. "I must create my own system, or be enslaved by another man's" is the pathetic cry of an intelligence that has mistaken its direction. It was on a hint from Lavater that Blake started to annotate. It was in rivalry with Swedenborg that he started systemising.

If Swedenborg had conversed with angels, so had Blake; if Swedenborg had visions, so had he; if

Swedenborg had found in the Bible the divine wisdom, and had received a special commission to be the interpreter of its spiritual meaning, Blake was impelled to the same task. From that day forward apocalyptic literature was the only literature to this poet, who came to think religion and art interchangeable terms at the very point where art is discarded for a revelation that boasts its independence from immediate beauty. The mystic, who claims a direct personal experience of reality, may not need art for himself, but if he would communicate his knowledge and remain an artist at the same time, he must respect the form that he has chosen. By inventing an arbitrary and unnecessary symbolism for his intuitions, by equally refusing to employ the traditional forms of literature, Blake did not transcend either but left a chaos of both. When he came at last to repudiate Swedenborg, he deserted all form and all models, and we see another fine mind dethroned in a chaos of its own creating. So long as he followed even the most extravagant of his models, he remains a man of letters.

At the moment intellectual systems and mystical matters did not, however, wholly occupy his mind. Like everyone else at the time, and with a lively memory of the American revolutionary war, he was deeply stirred by events in France. Circumstances threw him into the company of sympathisers with the French Revolution in London, and these he met at the shop of Johnson, the bookseller. Fuseli had introduced the pair to one another, and Blake had been doing some engravings for him. Johnson was the publisher of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* (1791), of Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793), and the friend of

Thomas Paine, whose *Rights of Man* he thought it prudent to decline. All these and more of the same feather resorted to Johnson's shop in St. Paul's Churchyard, and Blake was employed by him to design and to engrave, among other work, six plates after Mary Wollstonecraft's *Tales for Children*. Johnson was not only a bookseller and a publisher but a patron and a host, who gave weekly dinners to the circle that gathered round him. At this time Blake attended these dinners. Characteristically enough Blake was the only one bold enough to wear the red cap in the street, until the Terror of September 1792 made him, like others, less confident of the approaching millennium. It was an odd society for Blake to enter. With their political ideas—a vague worship of liberty—he thought himself in sympathy, though political matters never much engaged him. To their scepticism and rationalism he was violently opposed. Atheists would have thought him a Christian, and Christians a heretic.

With all his courage, Blake had an excellent sense for practical affairs, and it was he who, as he would afterward relate, saved Paine from the clutches of the panic-ridden authorities. In 1792 these began to take repressive measures against "seditious publications", and in September, the very month in which the author of the *Rights of Man* had been elected by the Department of Calais a member of the National Convention, the English Government began an action for libel against Paine. This step gave an enormous circulation to the second part of his book, which had been recently published, and encouraged Paine and the "friends of liberty" to reply with inflammatory meetings and public addresses. One day in September,

after Paine had recounted at Johnson's shop an exciting speech which he had delivered at a meeting on the previous evening, Blake, who was present, stopped Paine at the moment of his departure and said to him : " You must not go home or you are a dead man ", and hurried him off to France. Only twenty minutes after Paine had left Dover for France, a warrant for his arrest reached the officials of the port. Six years later Johnson himself was fined and imprisoned for publishing " a seditious book ", but he continued to give his weekly dinners in gaol.

His prompt service to Paine is not the only instance of Blake's disinterested courage in an emergency. His back rooms in Poland Street overlooked the premises of Astley's Circus, where its animals and their keepers could be seen. One day, according to Tatham, Blake saw a boy limping painfully about with his feet chained to a horse's hobble. Indignant at the sight, Blake made a successful appeal to the circus men to set the lad free, and when Mr. Astley came round later to protest against the interference, Blake pacified his anger. During the year 1792 both Sir Joshua Reynolds and Blake's mother died. Mrs. Blake, senior, had reached the age of seventy, and was buried on September 4 in Bunhill Fields. This is virtually all that is known about her, for the friends of Blake's later years remember that, while he often talked of his brother Robert, he hardly ever mentioned either his mother or his father. Earlier in the year, on February 23, the funeral procession of Sir Joshua Reynolds passed in state from his house in Leicester Fields to St. Paul's Cathedral. The two had met, but between men so different in their gifts and in their fortune, there



had been little in common. Gilchrist speaks of "a surviving friend" who remembered a conversation of Blake's about Reynolds. "He became furious about what Reynolds had dared to say of his early works. When a very young man he had called on Reynolds to show him some designs, and had been recommended to work with less extravagance and with more simplicity, and to correct his drawing. This Blake seemed to regard as an affront never to be forgotten. He was very indignant when he spoke of it." At this or some other interview it is also recorded that Blake found Reynolds very pleasant personally, and no doubt they were equally matched in their manners.

The annotations made by Blake upon Reynolds's *Discourses* and Bacon's *Essays* are characteristic examples of the way in which Blake's dramatic imagination would transform every idea or personality into a symbolic figure. Thus if Blake left explanations to make known why he deemed Reynolds "hired by Satan to depress art", and the expression is figurative, not abusive, we need not despair of reducing many of his symbolic figures to simpler proportions. So far as the new language can be deciphered, it is intelligible if not coherent, but the difficulties that it offers are not proportional to its value, except as an index of Blake's peculiarity of mind. The time has come to admit that one of the fascinations of Blake's prophetic terminology is the pleasure of deciphering a linguistic puzzle. The value of what has been deciphered is another matter, which those who have lost themselves in unravelling the obscurities are not always the best fitted to judge. Reynolds was a master of the representational art that Blake despised, and in criticising him he was doing little

more than defend his own preferences. Each is right from his own point of view, and it was natural that they should fix on the limitations of each other. Art may be representational or symbolic. Each has a different and appropriate technique, and Blake did at least claim to the last a minute and appropriate execution.

It is now time to turn to the visionary writings that he composed during the five years that he spent at Poland Street. Fortunately the two clearest and tersest statements are, according to Mr. Sampson's reckoning, the first. The two tracts *There is no Natural Religion* and *All Religions are One* would appear, says Mr. Sampson, to be the first examples of Blake's Illuminated Printing, 1788.

The first takes the form of sixteen aphorisms, of which the crucial ones are these :

Man cannot naturally perceive but through his Natural or Bodily organs. (I.)

Man, by his Reasoning Power, can only compare and judge of what he has already perceived. (II.)

If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic Character, the Philosophic or Experimental would soon be at the Ratio of all things ; and stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again.

The second part of this tract reminds us that :

Man's Perceptions are not bounded by Organs of Perception ; he perceives more than Sense (though ever so acute) can discover.

Reason, or the Ratio of all we have already known, is not the same that it shall be when we know more.

The Desire of Man being Infinite, the possession is  
\* Infinite and himself Infinite.

He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only, sees himself only.

Therefore God becomes as we are that we may be as He is.

This is a pithy statement of the relation and contrast between the imagination and the reason, the tension between which, whether in the soul of one man or in the world, forms the repeated drama of Blake's prophetic books.

The second tract, *All Religions are One*, is contained in eight principles, of which the crucial ones are these :

The Poetic Genius is the True Man, and the Body or Outward Form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius. . . .

As all men are alike in outward form, so, and with the same infinite variety, all are alike in the Poetic Genius.

The Religions of all nations are derived from each nation's different reception of the Poetic Genius, which is everywhere called the Spirit of Prophecy.

As all men are alike, though infinitely various, so all Religions : and as all similars have one source, the True Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius.

This tract treats exclusively of the imagination or poetic genius, while, though in it the rational is excluded from consideration, the words knowledge and experiment are used. They have a different meaning from the one which was given to them in the first tract. In the opening words of *All Religions are One*, the "faculty which experiences" is not one of the five senses, but the imagination. We have, indeed, "the *true* faculty of knowing" and the "true method of knowledge", but the adjective disguises the mode and organ meant. The scientific method and the "true method", observation and the "true faculty" of intuition, are the rational or evil and imaginative or good of Blake's world, except when he gave the terms Hell and Evil to his own side in order to emphasise his opposition to the standards that he was attacking. Milton's covert precedent for this paradoxical pro-

ceeding delighted him. Only when, as he found in the art of Reynolds, the poetic genius is used to glorify rather than transcend the visible world did Blake refuse to allow it any merit. If, as he declared in his annotations to the *Discourses*, "mere enthusiasm is the all in all", plainly all discipline should be subordinated to idiosyncrasy. If we must regard Blake as a theorist, then the results of his theory on his practice are decisive. He was an enthusiast, with the curious desire to make "mere enthusiasm" a creed. One can criticise this by asking if this desire was not a trace of the old Adam which he was endeavouring to cast out. Enthusiasm, however, was in the air, and its religious exponents called themselves Enthusiasts or Methodists indifferently. Blake seems such an exception in his age that it is necessary to remember how many tendencies of his age he was, in truth, displaying. It is the combination of his gifts, the varied tendencies that he desired to reconcile, that makes him an arresting figure. Once the solvent of criticism is employed upon his  $\frac{2}{3}$  work, we find ourselves tempted to defend his writings by his designs, his ideas by his art, his visions by his practical good sense, his art by his religious intentions. The consequence is that he offers to the world a multi-form appeal which confers a glamour that is sometimes deceptive on the separate achievements of his genius. The religious revival and the poetic revival of his age united in him, and he used the language of the one to "defend the impulse of the other. He declared religion to be a derivative of poetry and Christianity to be the practice of art. He is therefore unsatisfactory as a guide in proportion as he is stimulating. No one can make more of his system than he made himself. Its

finest fusion was his own personality. We go to him to tantalise, to enrich, to enliven, but not to satisfy the understanding. Even he himself became dissatisfied with his own mixture of symbols, and we now have to study his attempt to replace them by a symbolism of his own. The enthusiasm that defied all other systems was "to enslave" its begetter more thoroughly than the adoption would have done of one which lay at his hand.

Even he could not remain insensible to the effect that his prophetic writings produced on those who later were to hear him read from them. His natural superbity defended itself in the only possible way. "Allegory addressed to the intellectual powers, while it is altogether hidden from the corporeal understanding, is my definition of the most sublime poetry", he was eventually to declare in one of his letters to Butts. Fine intentions, however, are not enough even for sublime poetry, and the pursuit of the sublime, as a primary end, may be no less disastrous than the study of perfection. *Tiriel* is the earliest attempt of Blake to realise his ideal in the statement of a myth, but as no direct clue was provided or has survived to the names or revelation, the understanding threatens to be darkened without the imagination being lit. Written in an irregular measure of fourteen syllables, and not often of fine cadence, it introduces the mysterious Tiriel, his dying wife Myratana, his children Heuxos, Yuva, and Hela, his brother Ijim, and other obscure figures. Outcast by his children, whom he curses at the death of their mother, Tiriel wanders into the night, is welcomed by Mnetha, Har, and Heva, but leaves them to pursue his way. He next encounters

his brother Ijim, who refuses his advances, covers him with obloquy, and carries him, like another Lear, back to his palace. After further wanderings and curses, the aged Tiriel dies. Tiriel is mentioned elsewhere and called the sôn of Urizen or reason, but beyond this we are left in the dark. These names and relations had some meaning to Blake, but nothing that the commentators have been able to infer about them convinces us that the meaning would have been adequately expressed had we the clue. They are the arbitrary creation of a mind relying upon its own intuition and yet desirous to rival and surpass the very system and order of which it felt but could not satisfy the need.

A more explicable and lovely work is the *Book of Thel*, a shorter prophecy likewise composed in 1789. It is written in the same measure as *Tiriel*, but with the pastoral quality of the *Songs of Innocence* the lines sing once more. Thel, the youngest daughter of the Seraphim, laments the shortness of life :

Why fade these children of the spring,  
 Corn but to smile and fall ?

The lily of the valley :

So weak, the gilded butterfly scarce perches on my head,  
 comforts her, for it is content with its own lot. So is the little cloud, though it too passes away. The lily renews the lamb, and the cloud the thirsty horse, but Thel refuses to be consoled, adding :

And all shall say, " Without a use this shining woman liv'd—  
 Or did she only live to be at death the food of worms ? "

To this the cloud answers :

How great thy use, how great thy blessing. Everything that  
 lives,  
 Lives not for itself alone.

The cloud summons the worm, "image of weakness", and Thel is astonished at its helplessness. Whereupon the clod bows over the weeping worm and exclaims :

Thou seest me, the meanest thing, and so I am indeed. . . .  
I ponder, and I cannot ponder ; yet I live and love.

Thel then dries her eyes and confesses that she had not known the love of God to be so great. She accepts the offer of the clay to enter and to return from the grave, from which the voice of sorrow asks :

Why cannot the ear be closed to its own destruction ?

to end a series of kindred questions with the lovely line :

Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire ?

Thel departs unhindered. Has she learned that, though the curtain be present, desire shall not fail nor the life that is at one with it ? The question is left unanswered, but the feeling created by the poem is too beautiful to be a blank Why.

This poem is also noteworthy for the long line that, at its best, it modulates beautifully, a line which makes us understand why even blank verse seemed too formal to its creator. Milton in his epic had discarded rhyme. Blake wished to surpass Milton by discarding measured rhythm too.

In 1790, with the famous prose of the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, we return to intellectual doctrine, which seems to spring from the last of his annotations to Swedenborg. "Heaven and Hell are born together", Blake had written, and the marriage of contraries, which is found in life because life is a fusion that thought cannot maintain because thought is analytical,

had always a fascination for him. He was to endeavour to make it into an intellectual system, and that this was a paradox made it appeal the more. In this book Blake is in the main lucid, forcible, and splendid in phrase. We observe that the obscure part is the metrical "argument", the best part the paradoxical proverbs, but the general tenor is clear enough. In the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake not only renounces Swedenborg but claims to initiate a new revelation prophesied by his former master. Swedenborg had called 1757, the year of Blake's birth, the first of a new spiritual dispensation, and this Blake claimed to lead in the opening words of his own book, written when he was thirty-three: "As a new heaven is begun, and it is now (1790) thirty-three years since its advent, the eternal Hell revives. And lo! Swedenborg is the Angel sitting at the tomb: his writings are the linen clothes folded up. Now is the dominion of Edom, and the return of Adam into Paradise." Humour, admiration, criticism are combined so fantastically in what follows that the general reader should cling to two of Blake's subsequently written comments on his early master, which make the issue between them fairly clear. In *Milton* Blake spoke of "Swedenborg, strongest of men, the Samson shorn by the churches"; and in 1825 he told Crabb Robinson: "Swedenborg was a divine teacher. He had done, and would do, much good. Yet he did wrong in endeavouring to explain to the reason what it could not comprehend." In other words, Swedenborg was intellectually too systematic for Blake, and while we may accept his warning in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* against systematic reasoning, we must not hope



to find much that reason can comprehend in Blake's prophetic books. These must be brought to the test of poetry, or oratory he preferred to call it, and if they disappoint the "intellectual powers" to which they were addressed, they disappoint the only test that Blake designed for them.

Briefly then, this prophetic book, which sustains the interest that, in its absence, would falter at the others, declares that "without contraries is no progression." From these "spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell. . . ." It further declares that the "body is a portion of the soul discerned by the five senses", that "energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or circumference of Energy. Energy is eternal delight." Blake then applies these principles to Milton's epic, in which he identifies Reason with Milton's Messiah, and also with the Satan of the Book of Job, "for this history has been adopted by both parties". The poet then describes his visit to Hell, where he was "delighted with the enjoyments of genius", and collected some of this wisdom into the proverbs that we all know. There is hardly one of these that is not fine or challenging, but they seem to say more than they really say because they are the several lyrical expressions of virtually a single idea, and their number suggests a range that is really a repetition. At the end of them, and there are over seventy, Blake describes how the imaginations of the ancient poets became grouped into a mythology which degenerated into a system when "forms of worship" were extracted

"from poetic tales". The succeeding Memorable Fancy is a defence of the imagination as a creator of spiritual and eternal fact, and identifies the one God of the Hebrews with the poetic genius, to which all other must pay tribute. He repeats that the "notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged", and says characteristically that he will expunge it by "printing by corrosives", the infernal method which melts apparent surfaces away to display the hidden meaning traced upon them. Printing had become a symbolic process to him.

In a symbolical printing house in Hell, which is next described, established religions are defined to be attempts to reconcile the prolific and rational types of man. The whole book, indeed, is the criticism of the imagination upon the forms which the imagination has created, forms which in the hands of unimaginative men repudiate, while they serve, the energy that has created them. From a further criticism of Swedenborg's system, we pass to this definition of the worship of God: "Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best; those who envy or calumniate great men hate God; for there is no other God." These words are put, of course, into the mouth of a devil, who then denies that Jesus gave sanction to the ten commandments. "No virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments. Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules."

It is an extremely fiery and stimulating book: a manifesto rather than an argument, and, as such, one that it would make dull reading to criticise. The reader, indeed, whose imagination does not delight in

the exaggeration of the statements, and cannot supply the necessary qualifications from his own, has not enough imagination to understand it. Blake is an elemental mystic in that he submits to no tradition, but endeavours to announce the original energy that has given birth to them all. For this fiery exposition Swedenborg was a convenient foil, and there is something of great parody in its exuberance. In the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* he makes use of different but familiar forms, and, therefore, offers little difficulty. Later, this indifference led him to invent for our confusion, and, after the commentators have done their best, there is no reason to suppose that the obscurer prophecies that were to follow either attain profounder thought or were the expression of an equally lucid mind. Therefore of all Blake's prophetic books the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is the indispensable volume, and by right has taken pride of place and fame. For energy of thought, pregnancy of phrase, and splendour of imagery it is unsurpassed in the ecstatic literature to which it belongs.

In 1791 Johnson the bookseller printed the first volume of Blake's *French Revolution*. It was never published, and the seven projected books which were to form the whole may have been abandoned because events took a form different from that anticipated by the poet. It describes symbolically the Convocation of the Notables before the fall of the Bastille, and the historical names become titanic forms similar to the mythic beings of the prophetic books. To the next year probably belongs the *Short Song of Liberty*. In rhythmic prose its twenty paragraphs, or verses, as we call them in the Bible, invite France, Spain, and

England to look up and cast their chains. The law is stamped to the dust with the cry "Empire is no more ! and now the lion and the wolf shall cease". Religion is implored no longer to "curse the sons of joy. . . . For everything that lives is holy." Thus we discover a restatement of Blake's principal theme, the eternal liberty of the imagination to create its own forms and to act on its own impulses. It is perhaps not too much to say that all his reading, all his history, all his mythology were no more than illustrations of this struggle between the imagination and the bonds that reason in the sphere of thought, morality and law in that of action, place upon it. If all men were both poets and saints Blake's might be a final and sufficient teaching. Blake's own life shows that it did not lead him astray in any external relation, and he remains a great exception in that his life displayed the order that his work was often to lack, splendid as the best of it was. His life is the justification of his teaching. His actions preserve an order not always to be found in his works.

The *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, the latest production of Blake's Poland Street days, has been called "Blake's book of love". Oothoon, the virgin joy of love, whose embraces have been rejected by the moral restraints from which her lover Theotormon suffers, exclaims :

Who taught thee modesty, subtil modesty, child of night and sleep ?

And does my Theotormon seek this hypocrite modesty ?

But Oothoon is not so, a virgin fill'd with virgin fancies,  
Open to joy and to delight wherever beauty appears :

If in the morning sun I find it, there my eyes are fix'd  
 In happy copulation : if in evening mild, wearied with work,  
 Sit on a bank and draw the pleasures of this free-born joy.

A fine passage, like one of Blake's designs, follows :

The moment of desire ! The moment of desire ! The  
 virgin  
 That pines for man shall awaken her womb to enormous  
 joys  
 In the secret shadows of her chamber. The youth shut up  
 from  
 The lustful joy shall forget to generate, and create an  
 amorous image  
 In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent  
 pillow.  
 Are not these the places of religion, the rewards of continence,  
 The self-enjoyings of self-denial ? Why dost thou seek  
 religion ?  
 Is it because acts are not lovely that thou seekest solitude,  
 Where the horrible darkness is impressed with reflections of  
 desire ?

Blake, not being himself a poet of desire, was the freer to claim for the energies of the body a liberty similar to that which he had already claimed for the soul. It is tempting to accept the inference of Mr. Ellis that this vision was "composed as part of the education of Mrs. Blake", for she had been brought up a strict puritan. If Blake's definite ideas seem strange, it is because he was an entirely virtuous man, whose impulses needed expression not restraint. This sounds a large claim, but I can find no evidence in Blake's life, a severe test, to show that he does not survive it.

The above complete the writings of Blake while he lived at Poland Street, where, too, the *Songs of Innocence* belong. Before considering the succeeding prophetic books, therefore, we will follow him to 13 Hercules Buildings, Lambeth, to which he moved in 1793.

## CHAPTER V

### LAMBETH

THE following seven years, from 1793-1800, were more productive than any others even in Blake's productive life. They were also his one period of comparative prosperity. It was to come to an end through an act of his own, as imaginatively wise as it was financially imprudent. Blake lived as well as wrote his proverbs, and the saying "Prudence is a rich, ugly old maid courted by incapacity" he put to the test. Not only did he compose at Lambeth the prophecies *America* (1793), *Europe* (1794), the first *Book of Urizen* (1794), the *Song of Los*, and the *Book of Ahania*, all in 1795, and two years later began his fair copy of the *Four Zoas*, but he engraved busily. In design his chief works were the illuminated edition of the *Songs of Experience* (1794) and the set of five hundred and thirty-seven drawings for Young's *Night Thoughts*, which Blake made to the order of Edwards, the bookseller, of New Bond Street. The book was to have been issued in parts, but only the first appeared, with forty-three designs, in 1797. Engravings from his own designs include the *Gates of Paradise* (1793) "for children", or, as he afterward called it, "for the sexes". The introductory and accompanying couplets called

the *Keys of the Gates* echo the ideas of the designs in rhyme. Once more they remind us that :

Mutual forgiveness of each vice,  
Such are the Gates of Paradise,  
Against the Accuser's chief desire,  
Who walk'd among the stones of fire.  
Jehovah's Finger wrote the Law ;  
Then wept ; and rose in zeal and awe,  
And the dead corpse, from Sinai's heat,  
Buried beneath His Mercy-seat.  
O Christians ! Christians ! tell me why  
You rear it on your altars high ?

There are sixteen plates, and the change of title was followed by certain revisions. The plate for the frontispiece represents two leaves. The upper bears a caterpillar, the lower a cocoon with a human face, so that the cocoon resembles an infant in swaddling clothes. This explains the image that was in Blake's mind when he wrote the couplet in the " *Auguries of Innocence* ", repeated, with one change, at the opening of the *Keys* :

The caterpillar on the leaf  
Repeats to thee thy mother's grief.

His eye and his imagination suggested the image that his design here explains. His designs are often a clue to his intention. His intention was to make an art of his ideas.

It is Tatham who introduces us to the personal life of Blake at Lambeth. The house had a garden with a vine which Blake, with his horror of education, would never allow to be pruned. It ran riot in many leaves and small bitter grapes so that it grew into an arbour rather than a fruit tree. There was also a summer-house near by. Here Mr. Butts, Blake's good friend and his only continuous patron, declared that he one

day found Blake and his wife sitting naked as Adam and Eve, and reciting passages from *Paradise Lost* in character. John Linnell, who knew Blake intimately later in his life, expressly doubted the truth of this story, and in one of his letters to L. R. Valpy, Samuel Palmer, another disciple of Blake's old age, said : " Mr. Butts's visit to ' Adam and Eve ' has grown in the memory, I think. I do not believe it. It is unlike Blake." The legend has always been popular. It was first retailed about town as an example of Blake's madness ; and it is since recalled as an instance of the way in which Blake's reputation for eccentricity would magnify any legend or utterance of his in support of a preconceived notion of his character. If it were true, it would not be decisive. The story is only of an isolated act, and all imaginative people, who are grown-up children, have at times desired to make whimsical experiments in conduct, to pretend, as children do, to be characters very different from their ordinary selves. Blake, who " loved laughing ", would certainly have laughed to find another husband and wife in this situation, but his imagination might also suggest that a passing fancy should be carried out. The fun consists in doing once what it would be dull and mad to do continually. It is clear, however, that the obedience even of Mrs. Blake would have been severely strained, and as it has been discredited by two reliable persons, it is chiefly interesting as a test of our own opinion of Blake's character.

An even less substantiated story of this period at Lambeth is that Blake threatened to add a concubine to his household, in the manner of the patriarchs, but that he abandoned the project when it made Mrs.



Blake cry. Once more, a desire for children, or his impatience at Mrs. Blake's "modesty", may have prompted him to tease her with such a plan. His dramatic imagination would have taken some such form in any argument, but as certainly he would not have realised his idea if it moved his wife to tears. Mr. Symons aptly quotes two passages from Crabb Robinson's reminiscences which show that Blake entertained the idea of concubinage, and that he had it from the Bible, where he learned that monogamous marriage was not "from the beginning". A man may hold a belief which the circumstances of his circle and his time may hinder him from practising. Toleration in public life, and independence of mind, mean that it shall be allowable to advocate actions which it is not allowable to perform. Blake's doctrine of freedom had its complement in his hatred of jealousy, to which his writings and conversation bear witness again and again.

Mr. Butts was not the only visitor to Blake's garden. There came there also pupils, and even thieves. According to Tatham, the Blakes returned from one of their long rambles to find that plate had been "carried away to the value of £60 and clothes to the value of £40 more". The word plate may be an error for plates, meaning worked and unworked copper of that value to its engraver, unless, as Mr. Ellis remarks, the well-to-do pupils that were now coming to Blake made him very handsome presents. Tatham also tells of a sum of £40 which Blake lent to a freethinking author who complained that, in spite of his many philosophical writings, his children had gone supperless to bed. The author's wife showed her gratitude

by calling a few days later to ask Mrs. Blake's opinion on "a very gorgeous dress" that she was wearing. A no less characteristic tale concerns a pale young man who passed Blake's door every day with a portfolio of drawings under his arm. Blake made his acquaintance, and, taking compassion on his condition, adopted him as a voluntary pupil and nursed him till he died.

Whether or not the stolen plate had been a present from Blake's other pupils, they were, in Tatham's words, "of high rank", and influential enough for him to be offered the post of drawing-master to the Royal Family. The acceptance of this post would have secured him from anxiety, but he was "aghast" at the risk that his art would run in king's palaces, and, with magnificent manners, dismissed all his pupils at the same time. Otherwise, he was afraid that his refusal might seem discourteous to the Court because he had been a friend of revolutionaries.

This decision apparently brought immediate financial disaster, for by 1798 employment on engraving, his only other reliable employment, had stopped. No doubt, too, teaching had been the better paid occupation, for Blake never received good prices for engraving. His real mainstay he had felt forced to throw away. At this crisis in his fortunes Mr. Thomas Butts luckily appeared, and from 1799 onward he became a steady patron of Blake's work. He deserves the record that Samuel Palmer made of him in another letter to Valpy, the letter in which he calls Mr. Butts "that remarkable man, that great patron of British genius". He was a great patron, because for over twenty years he not only bought whatever work Blake happened to be doing, but for a small price bought

regularly, and was willing at times to purchase one drawing a week. Of Blake's four patrons, Mrs. Mathew, Thomas Butts, Hayley, and Linnell, only Butts and Linnell believed in Blake's genius, and were therefore willing to accept whatever that genius had to give. Toward the end of the artist's life, Butts's house in Fitzroy Square had become a Blake museum, filled with examples of his drawing and engraving. In the letter just mentioned, Samuel Palmer goes on :

Blake often expressed a wish to take me himself to Mr. Butts, but ere the day was fixed "came the blind fury". What a show, with such a showman ! What a casket of a house ! What prince of his own choosing ever got together under his broad roof so many precious thoughts ! Yes, so many, even if they had been bolted to the bran, and a third part burnt as refuse.

It is pleasant to recall that at the moment of his greatest need Blake found the patron who was fitted for this part.

The most convenient introduction to the prophetic books that chiefly occupied Blake during his seven years at Lambeth is to be found in the paragraphs addressed to the public at the opening of the later *Jerusalem*. Of "the measure in which the following poem is written", Blake says :

When this verse was first dictated to me, I considered a monotonous cadence like that used by Milton and Shakespeare, and all writers of English blank verse, derived from the modern bondage of rhyming, to be a necessary and indispensable part of verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself. I therefore have produced a variety in every line, both of cadences and number of syllables. Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place ; the terrific numbers are reserved

for the terrific parts, the mild and gentle for the mild and gentle parts, and the prosaic for inferior parts; all are necessary to each other. Poetry fettered fetters the human race.

In regard to his mythology, Blake says in the same poem :

I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's.  
I will not reason or compare : my business is to create.

The former passage suggests that he may have tried to write one of these prophecies in blank verse, but had found it irksome. In proportion as his own ideas were not luminous, a definite form would be embarrassing to him. While there are beautiful lines, apart from the lyrics, in the prophetic books, we cannot accept Blake's assertion that each word and every letter has been carefully studied, or that there is infinite variety throughout. These works are full of monotony, of repetition, with all the apparent faults of an imperfectly conceived work, the execution of which reflects its imperfection. Nor can we accept the view that, had we a complete clue to the meaning and relations of the mythology of these poems, all would become acceptable. The form would still be a failure. No passage that has been deciphered compares in force or beauty with the lucid pages on which we come that need no investigation at all. These books are the curiosities of literature, not its masterpieces.

The fatal idea that Blake, the artist, must not only create but create a "system" presumably rose from his study of his models. The only epic with which he was acquainted was Milton's; the only literature on which he had been nursed was the Bible and Swedenborg. The only art with which he had lived, and lived

as a boy, was cathedral art, and he never doubted that a single mind sufficed to create what had required the traditions of centuries to bring to perfection. It was an inordinate ambition. Tied in his writings to some form of language, he invented new names, and without the narrative sense endeavoured to construct an epic. Los, the imagination, must be Sol spelt backward, but the meaning of the others can be found only by inference from the context in which we meet them. Identifying the Divine Humanity with the imagination, or emanation, of Man, and the Reason with Urizen, Blake devotes one book after another to their struggles. He says in *Jerusalem* :

Each man is in his Spectre's power  
Until the arrival of that hour,  
When his Humanity awake,  
And cast his Spectre into the lake.

We become conscious of this reality by direct vision, which is our divine inheritance from the original procreative force behind all material things. To strengthen our communion with it, we make by our imagination images after its likeness, in the same manner as that in which it has made images of its infinite desire in nature and in ourselves. There are, then, three worlds : the world of nature, the supernatural world of man, and the superhuman world of art. This world of art, Blake thought, falls from its finest use when it is content to transform its inferiors. Art, he considered, is designed to realise something beyond these, the spirit itself without the intermediary of symbol even. Art is to dispense with its means in order to remain pure. The mystic who is not an artist understands Blake at once, though he may wonder why Blake was

not content with the kingdom of Los within him. The artist knows that there is an essential difference between art and mysticism, and wonders why Blake should invite failure by an attempt to confuse the two.

All the prophetic books resolve themselves into variations on a single theme : the spiritual or imaginative impulse of life at war with the hindrances and restraints that the defective constitution of human beings, or the pressure of society, law, morals, formal religion, place upon it. The vast mythology that grew like a fungus over the central stem is the multitudinous peopling of the two combatants with symbols for every thought or aspect of their relations. To master this, the complete concordance, which Mr. J. P. R. Wallis and Mr. D. J. Sloss have just published as I correct these proofs, is necessary, but no explanation of puzzling detail can supply a clarity or beauty that the author did not achieve himself.

All Blake's names represent not persons or places but abstract ideas or states of soul. In the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* the daughters "sighed toward America", and *America*, the prophecy engraved in 1793, is the state of rebellion against restraints upon desire. Urthona appears to be that of which Los or imagination is another aspect, and Orc is unrestrained desire or fiery passion. Orc sees "a terrible birth" to be taking place in America. The revolution described is at once historic and symbolical ; America and Albion are severally a country and a state of mind. Washington, and other names of real characters, are equally with Orc symbolic figures. The praise of spiritual liberty is told in terms of contemporaneous happenings, though the war in the heaven of man's

mind is the real conflict, and the historical events but its reverberations on the earth. In an interesting passage we are told that, had Albion's angel succeeded in repressing this rebellion :

Then had America been lost, o'erwhelm'd by the Atlantic,  
And earth had lost another portion of the infinite.

The justification for this revolt is implied in the following rhetorical questions :

Must the generous tremble, and leave his joy to the idle, to  
the pestilence  
That mock him? Who commanded this? What God?  
What angel?  
To keep the gen'rous from experience till the ungenerous  
Are unrestrain'd performers of the energies of nature;  
Till pity is become a trade, and generosity a science  
That men get rich by.

The effect of victory is characteristically described :

The doors of marriage are open, and the priests, in rustling  
scales,  
Rush into reptile coverts, hiding from the fires of Orc  
That play around the golden roofs in wreaths of fierce desire,  
Leaving the females naked and glowing with the lusts of  
youth.  
For the female spirits of the dead, pining in bonds of religion,  
Run from their fetters; reddening, and in long-drawn arches  
sitting,  
They feel the nerves of youth renew, and desires of ancient  
times  
Over their pale limbs, as a vine when the tender grape  
appears.

The world of convention is consumed, and Urizen, "weeping in dismal howlings before the stern Americans", is allowed twelve years, the interval between the American and the French revolutions, in which "angels and weak men" shall govern the strong, and "then their end shall come". France, Spain, and Italy see the repressors of Albion smitten with their own

plagues, for their "slow advance to shut the five gates of their law-built heaven" upon the senses is unable to stem the advance of Orc. The "five gates" are consumed, and the fierce flames burn magnificently round the heavens and the homes of men.

The late war was expected by many to prelude the regeneration of the world, and, therefore, it is hardly surprising that one so ardent as Blake should hope everything from contemporary revolutions. The next work of the orator, *Europe* (1794), is less a prophecy than a retrospective view of history since the Christian era by the light of the revolution that *America* had announced. New and puzzling names are introduced, but there comes from them as from a thicket one line of singular beauty :

Like gay fishes on the wave, when the cold moon drinks the dew.

This has magic, and might seem the forerunner of all Mr. Yeats's beauty. We are told that Enitharmon, the emanation of Los and one of the daughters of Albion, had slept for eighteen hundred years, and during this time "thought changed the infinite into a serpent", and "Man became an angel, Heaven a mighty circle turning, God a tyrant crowned". These lines, Blake's interpretation of history, remind us of his contention in his previous tract that, without the poetic genius, all thought would "repeat the same dull round over again". In *Europe* Blake glances at England, the spiritual aspect of which is Albion, and declares its condition to be "a woman's triumph" :

Every house a den, every man bound : the shadows are fill'd  
With spectres, and the windows wove over with curses of iron :  
Over the doors "Thou shalt not", and over the chimneys  
"Fear" is written :



This reads uncomfortably like a prophecy of the United States of to-day. Enitharmon awakes from her sleep of eighteen centuries and sings to her delighted children, calling upon Orc to "give our mountains joy of thy red light". Beholding the morning, he alights on the vineyards of France, and the book ends with Los calling his sons to join him in the spiritual battle. A prologue, which exists in the Linnell copy of the prophecy, relates that *Europe* was dictated to Blake by a fairy whom he caught as it was sitting on a tulip.

In the first *Book of Urizen* (1794) we come to closer grips with the argument. The work consists of a brief prelude and nine short chapters. The lines this time are of nine syllables or less, and the subject is confined more strictly to the workings or systems of Urizen, in their incessant endeavour to subjugate, bind, and imprison all instinctive energy in rules, moralities, and codes. To this the Eternals must ever be opposed. In this book, which is Blake's version of *Genesis*, Urizen is identified with mortal or natural life, and the fall comes to mean man's mortal existence after he has come to live independently of the original energy that created him. Blake reminds us that Adam in Paradise was not the same being as Adam cast forth. The one was a divine and eternal being: the other the first of mortals. The word Man with its two different meanings causes confusion, and the different symbolism of the mystics is nowhere more suggestive than in the different emphasis that it is used to give to the same ideas. In Blake's book a shadow rises in eternity before the earth or death existed. From out the waters rises "a wide world of solid obstruction". Eternity

rolled wide apart "leaving ruinous fragments of life". Urizen builds bulwarks against the fires of the Eternals, who observe the black globe that he has created. Los keeps watch for them, and notes the seven changes of Urizen, as imagination always watches the transformations of reason and law in their ceaseless endeavour to capture the life that eludes their prohibitions. Pity, "the first female", is created, and a curtain "called science" is woven to screen the Eternals from the children of time. Even Los "beheld eternity no more". Enitharmon, the emanation of Los, gives birth to the child Orc or desire, who bursts the fetters laid upon him, and in the presence of Orc those dead to imagination begin to awake to life. Urizen explores the abyss of reason with the instruments of science, while Enitharmon, encircled with prophecy or poetry, gives birth to "an enormous race" of spiritual desires. Urizen's own children are "the sons and daughters of sorrow", and he curses them in despair when he sees that neither "flesh nor spirit" can keep his "iron laws", and that life lives upon death. The tears of reason become pity, "a cold shadow" that follows him "like a spider's web", and this web is the "net of religion", that is denial of desire. Under this net the senses shrink so that the shrunken eyes do not discern the "woven hypocrisy". At the end of "six days" the mental world is as stable as the physical:

And on the seventh day they rested  
And they bless'd the seventh day, in sick hope,  
And forgot their Eternal Life,

as it were, in a wilderness of Sundays. The "human heart" is "bound down by narrowing perceptions", and their children wept and built

Tombs in the desolate places,  
And form'd Laws of Prudence, and call'd them  
The Eternal Laws of God.

These children remain "beneath the net", while a happier remnant follows Fuzon, a flame-like spirit, out of the earth. "They called it Egypt", the term which mystical interpreters of the Bible identify with nature, the flesh, and mortal things.

This prophecy, being mainly concerned with the single figure of Urizen, is worth contrasting with the earlier prose where the criticism of unimaginative reason is set forth. We have exchanged prose for a cadence that generally is not its peer, and ideas for images, and cannot but ask if there has been advantage in the change. No doubt the words cave, tent, city, web have a symbolic meaning, but when this has been penetrated and the result set forth, it is proper to ask whether the thought is better expressed or more profound. The only reply can be that what Swinburne called "the floating final impression of power" is a quality, but a quality, it should be added, that is too easily valued for that which it does not reveal.

In the year 1795 the *Song of Los* was engraved, and we have the same visionary conflict, related this time from the opposite point of view.

The book describes the passage of inspiration from East to West, and, because all religions degenerate into moral codes :

They saw Urizen give his Laws to the nations  
By the hands of the children of Los.

Abstract philosophy arises in the East, passes to Greece, and in the course of ages the jealousy of man-made empires and systems chains Orc to the ground.

The cry of human distress provides a gospel for Jesus. Mahomet next receives "a loose Bible", and the northern nations "a code of war". The effects were to produce "churches, hospitals, castles, palaces" till like a dream "eternity was obliterated and erased". Nature herself shrank

Till a philosophy of five senses was complete :  
Urizen wept and gave it into the hands of Newton and Locke.

The kings of Asia, or persecuting spirits, invoke  
famine, pestilence, and poverty

That the pride of the heart may fail,  
That the lust of the eyes may be quench'd.

Urizen hears this cry and "clouds of despair" cover Europe. Even Jerusalem, the kingdom of the spirit, is eclipsed by them. From the European darkness Orc rises like a pillar of fire. In the convulsion "the grave shrieks with delight"; and Urizen wept at the awakening of the energy that eludes him.

Industrial democracy, the opposite of aristocracy, is the worship of the commonplace, and for the minority, especially in America, there is encouragement in these prophecies of William Blake.

In the same year, 1795, was engraved the *Book of Los*, which glances back to some primitive or paradisaal age when the energies of man were still uncorrupted. Then Los "bound in a chain" is compelled to watch Urizen's shadow. Los stands between the divided flames of desire, which give no light nor heat, but freeze before him into "a vast solid without fluctuation", which Los endures

Till impatience no longer could bear  
The hard bondage : rent, rent, the vast solid  
With a crash from immense to immense.

He bursts his adamantine prison and falls into the void of error, for, in one of Blake's great sayings, " Truth has bounds, error none ". In his fall " contemplative thoughts " arose and " wrath subsided ", as the mind organised itself and created for itself a body. This, like the first creation, gave light to the dark void and enabled Los to discern the " backbone of Urizen ", the spinosities of reason. To subdue it Los makes a hammer, an anvil, and forges an orb of fire or vital flame.

In the difficult *Book of Ahania*, the last of the three prophecies to be engraved in 1795, Fuzon, the fiery energy, or " son of Urizen's silent burnings ", exclaims :

Shall we worship this Demon of smoke, this abstract Non-  
entity,  
This cloudy God seated on waters,  
Now seen, now obscur'd, king of Sorrow ?

At his assault Urizen divides, and his " parted soul ", Ahania, he seizes, calls Sin, and hides her in his jealousy though she is " invisible ". Ahania, too, is " his invisible lust ", and thus a symbol of the perverted instinct that lurks in the heart of many puritans despite their elaborate codes. She falls into the chaos of these systems to become the " mother of pestilence ". Urizen in revenge prepares his bow, and fits to it a rock aimed at his energy, Fuzon, who had supposed Urizen to be slain. The rock entered Fuzon's bosom and fell to earth on Mount Sinai, the loveless mountain of law. Urizen bears the corpse of Fuzon to " an accursed tree ", which grew from the " mystery under his heel ", and on this tree he nails Fuzon. Pestilence and all " Urizen's army of horrors " radiate from the " corse on the tree ", around which is heard the voice

of Ahania lamenting at the abyss which Urizen has placed between his sinful energies, which she exemplifies, and himself.

This is the last of the shorter prophetic books, and before passing to *The Four Zoas* or *Vala* we may pause to ask what we have gained from them. From the *Book of Thel* onward the cancer of nebulous myth increasingly eats its way into the body of the poetry. From first to last there is proliferation rather than development of ideas. The imagery employed is monotonous almost to sterility; the ideas overlap and return upon themselves, and we watch the mind of the writer revolving in a circle from which he seeks to escape by subdivision of his symbols. He depicts the history of man's mental life in terms of two opposing principles, which he subdivides into minor reflections of themselves, but he is unable to do more than repeat their quarrel. It is true that Los, Orc, and Urizen are very living figures as we open our newspapers, learn what is happening in America, or are unexpectedly admitted behind the scenes of someone's private life. But it is not true that one book after another gives us a profounder insight into the spiritual conflict that it depicts, or that Blake's symbolism justifies itself in proportion as it expands. These prophetic books have added nothing to beauty or to literature; they have added virtually nothing to what he himself made clear in the lucid prose portions of themselves. They show Blake mastered by, and not mastering, his ideas, and, being on the track of a system that it was not in him to create, he is deserted by his poetic genius and repeats the "same dull round over again". Urizen, whose value was under-estimated

in Blake's view of the universe, takes his revenge in the prophetic books, and evolves innumerable classifications which repeat themselves.

*The Four Zoas*, dated 1797, and composed with revision between the years 1795-1804, is a longer work. It was originally called "Vala, or the death and judgment of the Ancient Man : a dream of Nine Nights". The second form of the title reads : "The Four Zoas, the torments of love and jealousy in the Death and Judgment of Albion the Ancient Man." It is usually regarded as a quarry from which Blake drew, for passages in it are found in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, both dated 1804 at Felpham, and it seems to comprehend the others. There are some simple passages of description, in the pastoral manner of *Thel*, such as the often quoted lines beginning :

And as the seed waits eagerly watching for its flower and  
fruit,  
Anxious its little soul looks out into the clear expanse  
To see if hungry winds are abroad with their invisible array.

But these returns to natural beauty are rare, though the alterations show Blake turning Biblical names into English ones. The four Zoas are, no doubt, as the term implies, the four beasts or living principles, and the statement of the theme is given thus :

Four Mighty Ones are in every Man : a Perfect Unity  
Cannot exist but from the Universal Brotherhood of Eden,  
The Universal Man, to Whom be glory evermore. Amen. . .

Los was the fourth immortal starry one. . . . Urthona was  
his name  
In Eden . . . Daughter of Beulah, sing  
His fall into Division and his Resurrection to Unity :  
His fall into Generation of decay and death, and his  
Regeneration by the Resurrection from the dead.

Blake's previous writings have made the subject familiar. It was, indeed, the reiterated subject of his prophecies, but unfortunately the more intelligible and quotable passages from *The Four Zoas*, such as the songs or lamentations, and the verses that seem echoes from the *Book of Proverbs*, do not bear directly on it. They form rather open spaces in the thicket of this book. A nebulous structure is again to be observed, but the mythopœic proliferation shrouds it as a heavy tod of ivy will shroud the door of a ruin. As literature or poetry it does not invite or detain readers. Blake's imagination is ossified by the symbolism that he had created. It attracts only the students of his mysticism, and nothing that the commentators have extracted from it is more than the elucidation of a cipher, for the justification of which no sufficient artistic or intellectual reason has been found. The student can be recommended to Dr. Paul Berger and to Mr. Foster Damon for the unravelment of a puzzle that remains puzzling when all is said and done. The confusions in Blake's method are not valuable in themselves. We are adopting his own criterion when we affirm that the idea cannot be superior to the execution, and that, for the reader who is not a specialist, Blake's mysticism in its prophetic forms remains the extravagance of an interesting mind. This will continue to beget a vast literature because obscurity attracts the attention that lucidity, even in difficult studies, does not need. Meaning for meaning, style for style, the prose of *Jerusalem*, when compared with the "verses" of the prophetic writings, remains the crown of Blake's mystical writing, and reaches the highest level of this thought.



## CHAPTER VI

### BLAKE'S IDEAS ON ART

SINCE Blake, as a man of letters, is the subject of this book, his ideas on art rather than his engravings, pictures, and water-colours must chiefly concern us. To appraise these ideas rightly it is essential to view them in relation to his time, for the motive of his artistic as of his poetic theories was a protest against the prevailing classicism of the eighteenth century. We have followed his writings to the year 1797, in which he began to transcribe and illustrate his fair copy of *The Four Zoas*. In 1796 he had made designs for Burger's *Leonora*, and was occupied with the engravings to Young's *Night Thoughts*. These appeared in 1797, and until Flaxman introduced him to Hayley in 1800, which led Blake to leave Lambeth for Felpham in September of that year, Blake ceased to be in request as an engraver. He had to rely on the friendly patronage of Butts, and had begun to make designs in water-colour. His ideas on art are also valuable because they contain the criticism of his defects as a writer.

As far back as 1793 Blake had issued to the public a prospectus giving a list of works now published and on sale at his house. This, however, was no more than an announcement and defence of the invention

of Illuminated Printing. For his ideas on art we must turn to his letters, his marginalia to Reynolds's *Discourses* (1808), and to the *Descriptive Catalogue* which he wrote for the exhibition of pictures at which his design for the "Canterbury Pilgrims" was shown. This manifesto itself was drafted in opposition to one by Stothard, and, though Blake was an injured party, it is characteristic that his chief ideas, his violently expressed opinions, should have been evoked in the mood of contradiction. Blake was not an orderly thinker. He was a very impulsive man of genius who to the last supposed that inspiration and genius were identical. His value to his age was that he overstated with all the lyric emphasis at his command certain artistic truths that were under-estimated in his time. His expression is so fervid in its eloquence, the point of view so audacious in its extravagance, that the words fall almost inevitably once on heedless now on obsequious ears. It is not easy to be critically just to statements that were designed to outdo in extravagance those at the moment opposed to them. The method of making a defect into a merit by exalting its defectiveness was Blake's controversial weapon. His only notion of meeting excess in one direction was to "make excess still more abundantly excessive" in another. It is not necessary, therefore, to scrutinise his epigrams as if they were considered judgements, for a good epigram has the property of making comment on it dull. Balance is provided by the theory of art against which he was rebelling.

Blake was the first modern artist to assert the doctrine of symbolism. In his day the Romantic Movement, of which he remains the sublime exponent,

had hardly begun. The couplet was still the rule for verse ; rationalism the habit of philosophy ; scepticism and irony the favourite play of the intellect ; formalism and authority the conventions of plastic art. In religion, in poetry, and in painting, enthusiasm, the personal play of the mind, was still suspect. Colour, the romantic element in painting, was preferred in warm, low tones. Nothing radiant was seemly. For example, Sir George Beaumont, Wordsworth's friend, declared that the colour of an old violin set the standard note for colour in pictures, and Nature herself in the parks and landscape gardens of the time was trimmed and pruned. Sir Joshua Reynolds was the leading artist, and his *Discourses* define the academic attitude. They are the more significant because Sir Joshua was not a professor who painted, but an artist who happened to be the first President of the Royal Academy. Though we think of him as a great colourist who imported the glowing harmonies of Venetian painting into England, his *Discourses* insist upon form, study, obedience to rule. As a colourist he was following his instincts rather than his precepts, for his canvases glow with a warmth of feeling hardly countenanced by his words. He was also a portrait painter, whose pictures reflect the pride of life, the splendour of material things.

Blake was a visionary artist, who placed inspiration, "mere enthusiasm", before everything else, and believed that his favourite masters, Michael Angelo, Raphael, Dürer, had likewise done so. Religious subjects were almost the only subjects for him. When, therefore, Reynolds says to his students : "I would chiefly recommend that an implicit obedience to the Rules of Art, as established by the practice of the great

masters, should be exacted from the young students ", Blake grows restive. When he reads that the student must be " afraid of trusting to his own judgment and of deviating into any track where he cannot find the footsteps of some former master ", Blake declares that Reynolds is depreciating the effects of inventive genius. Finally, when Reynolds quietly says : " Mere enthusiasm will carry you a little way ", Blake cries, as if in pain, " mere enthusiasm is the all in all ". Blake's own theory is rooted in his declaration that poetry, painting, and music are " the three powers in man of conversing with Paradise ", of which the expulsion from Eden had not deprived him. Each man entered into eternity, so far as his imagination inspired him. The reflection of nature and of all perishable things in art was the creation of uninspired men, who fell back on memory to fill its absence.

Blake is thus the Wesley of the arts. To him religion was an artistic activity, so that he was always offering one in terms of the other, and instead of pleasing either party he offended almost all. When he states that the Old and New Testaments are the two great codes of art, neither artists nor Christians feel at ease with him. In his practice he had all the defects of his qualities, and his practice is the real test of the strength and weakness of his ideas. In his Public Address he records the current criticism of his work to have been : " he can conceive but he cannot execute ". This criticism was a convenient way of expressing the fact that, while Blake was capable of executing anything that his imagination conceived, he was entirely at the mercy of his theory of inspiration, and worked without pause whether he happened to be

inspired or not. His theory and his practice suffered because he left no room for second thoughts, and anything "done in the heat of his spirits" was justified. Believing, then, in inspiration, Blake asks in his *Descriptive Catalogue* "shall painting be confined to the sordid drudgery of facsimile representations of merely mortal and perishing substances, and not be, as poetry and music are, elevated into its own proper sphere of invention and visionary perception? No, it shall not be so! Painting, as well as poetry and music, exists and exults in immortal thoughts." Perhaps in all his writings there is no more complete or eloquent expression of his fundamental ideas than that contained in the prose passage addressed to the Christians, which may be found in *Jerusalem* :

I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty of both body and mind to exercise the Divine Arts of imagination—imagination, the real and eternal world of which this vegetable universe is but a faint shadow, and in which we shall live in our eternal or imaginative bodies, when these vegetable mortal bodies are no more. The Apostles knew of no other Gospel. What were all their spiritual gifts? What is the Divine Spirit? Is the Holy Ghost any other than an intellectual fountain? What is the harvest of the Gospel and its labours? What is that talent which it is a curse to hide? What are the treasures that we are to lay up for ourselves? Are they any other than mental studies and performances? What are all the gifts of the Gospel? Are they not all mental gifts? Is God a Spirit who must be worshipped in spirit and in truth? And are not the gifts of the Spirit everything to Man? O ye Religious, discountenance every one among you who shall pretend to despise Art and Science! I call upon you in the name of Jesus! What is the life of Man but Art and Science? . . . Is not this plain and manifest to the thought?

An even closer identity between art and religion is affirmed in the aphorisms written round the engraving of the *Laocoon* about 1817. Here Blake says : " Prayer is the study of art ; praise is the practice of art ; fasting, etc., all relate to art." Finally, he adds, " a poet, a painter, a musician, an architect ; the man or woman who is not one of these is not a Christian " ; and, again, " Jesus and his apostles and disciples were all artists ". His very theory of draughtsmanship is converted into a religious idea. *The Ghost of Abel*, etched in 1822, begins with the statement : " Nature has no outline, but imagination has. Nature has no tune, but imagination has. Nature has no supernatural and dissolves : imagination is eternity."

In a *Descriptive Catalogue*, printed in 1809, Blake comes nearer to formal instruction :

The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this : That the more distinct, sharp, and wiry the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art, and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imagination, plagiarism, and bungling. . . . The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist's mind, and the pretence of plagiary in all its branches. How do we distinguish the oak from the beech, the horse from the ox, but by the bounding outline ? How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another but by the bounding line and its infinite inflections and movements ? What is it that builds a house and plants a garden but the definite and determinate ? What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery but the hard and wiry line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions ? Leave out this line and you leave out life itself.

To particularise is to intensify vitality, and Blake's statement " exuberance is beauty " was his endeavour " to bring out weight and measure in a time of dearth ".

His apprenticeship to engraving under Basire had taught him that drawing is the foundation of pictorial art, and in his Public Address, written about 1810 but never printed, Blake defines painting as "drawing on canvas", and engraving as "drawing on copper", definitions to which he was moved by the softer school of Schiavonetti, Bartolozzi, and Angelica Kauffman which was coming into vogue in his day. Blake's own paintings are mainly in water-colour, which he sometimes called fresco. He had a dislike of oil, which he declared to be responsible for muddled tones, and his own most beautiful work in colour is distinguished by its radiant tints. Speaking of some of Blake's hand-coloured prints, Rossetti said in his beautiful way: the gazer, "if they be for him, will be joyful more and more the longer he looks, and will gain back in that time some things as he first knew them, not encumbered behind the days of his life: things too delicate for memory or years since forgotten, the momentary sense of spring in winter sunshine, the long sunsets long ago, and falling fires on many distant hills". In work so lovely at its best, so vacuous sometimes in conception and execution, fine intention is rarely lacking. Masterly in the great designs to *Job*, and in the best of those to Milton, Virgil, or Dante, and in such isolated designs as "The Ancient of Days", "Nebuchadnezzar", "The River of Life", the conception at first carries us away, and a study of them shows that the range of Blake's power is wider than is always remembered. The "Canterbury Pilgrims" shows what he could accomplish in the world of outward reality, as the "Last Judgment" proves what he could realise in ideal grandeur. Exceptional interest attaches to the

"Canterbury Pilgrims", because it is Blake's chief attempt to combine the two. The subjects of his pictures are imaginative concepts which transform the figures or landscapes that are used to convey them. The only natural symbol which he never came to suspect was the human body. His poetry and the exquisite flowers, flames, rivers in his colour-work attest his instinctive love of natural things, and perhaps led him to fear that, like other artists, he might become content with the sleep of nature. All life, said Blake, is a Canterbury Pilgrimage, but without the precise definition that Chaucer's poem gave to his conception it might have become lost in an attempt to realise some universal dream. Reacting from the formalism of his day, and endeavouring in Mr. Yeats's words to be always "a literalist of the imagination", we can agree with the painter who told the present writer that music was the medium best fitted to express the tumult of Blake's mind. If we accept its own critical dicta for our criterion, we can discriminate between his successes and his failures, and note how, for instance, when his imagination finely conceived Jacob's ladder to be a spiral stair, execution did not lag behind it. Even the "Canterbury Pilgrims," for all their precise particularity, are portraits of eternal states of soul. The result is that the visions of a religious mystic have been made visible to the world, and the world is no longer asked to believe the seer's visions without having them set before it with the seer's eyes.



## CHAPTER VII

AT FELPHAM WITH HAYLEY, 1800-1803

WORLDLY matters, as we have seen, were going ill with Blake at Lambeth from the moment when he decided to decline a post at Court, and to give up all his pupils. Several of these were evidently in a good position, but it was an older friend who came to his rescue. Blake's friendship for Flaxman, whom he had met at Mrs. Mathew's, survived Flaxman's departure for Italy and the seven years that passed before his return in 1794. After Flaxman's marriage in 1782, when he and his wife set up house in Wardour Street, they used sometimes to spend their summer holidays at Eartham, which was the Sussex home of the fashionable poet and country gentleman, William Hayley.

The Hermit of Eartham, as he liked to call himself, was a prosperous, cultivated, amiable but undiscerning man who is now remembered, a little severely, because he liked to associate with people more distinguished than himself. From the date of his birth, in 1745, Hayley's life had fallen in pleasant places, and fortune in crudely reversing the verdict of his contemporaries has remedied, in the world's way, one injustice by another. Born in Chichester of well-to-do parents, and educated at Eton and Trinity Hall,

Cambridge, at the age of twenty-seven Hayley left London for his family residence, where he resolved to devote himself to art and literature. After composing a tragedy that Garrick declined, and abandoning miniature painting through some defect in his eyesight, he decided to make the world aware of his existence by addressing poetical epistles to people of note. In 1780 he gained his end by choosing his friend Romney for one, and Gibbon for the object of three, of these epistles. They were well received, and encouraged by this success he resolved to trust to his own inspiration, and at once composed a long poem on *The Triumphs of Temper*. Designed to be "beneficial to life and manners", his verses taught young women how to deserve the reward of a good husband. Such a paragon, the poet explained, is most likely to be won by girls who never allow themselves to be put out by the irritability of their parents and relations. The intention of Hayley to combine the several virtues of Dante and Pope in his treatment of this theme proved too ambitious, but the parents were naturally delighted. *The Triumphs of Temper* was found on every parlour-table, and quickly ran into twelve editions. Hayley reflected the taste of his day because his own was not superior to it.

It was just for this kind of success that Hayley was fitted. His genial manners and pleasant conversation, his respectable scholarship and obliging disposition, made him generally liked, and he was ready to put these gifts at the service of artists less well able than he to look after themselves. The only indiscretion recorded of Hayley is the birth of Thomas Alphonso, a natural son to whom he was the more devoted because

he had no children by either of his acknowledged wives. From each in turn the poet separated. On the death of Thomas Warton in 1790 Hayley was offered the laureateship by George III. Though Hayley liked to be associated with artists and writers of repute, he declined the honour. It was the inner rather than the outer circle that attracted him. While he had much respect for respected people, he never made official prestige the test of personal distinction. To be admired was enough ; to have been decorated was unnecessary to gain the friendship of William Hayley. Hayley was esteemed a poet and a connoisseur, and can hardly be blamed for endorsing this opinion. A dilettante of several arts, and a man of means as well, the rôle of patron seemed designed for him. If such a man chooses his clients well, any blunders that he makes have all the gifts of genius to immortalise them.

In 1792 Hayley had made the acquaintance of Cowper, and he had the honour of persuading Pitt to grant Cowper a pension. This was precisely the kind of service that Hayley was fitted to perform, and it was his well-known benevolence that probably led Flaxman to introduce Blake to Hayley in 1800. The ties between Hayley and Flaxman were of long standing. Not only was Flaxman an honoured guest at Eartham, but the young Alphonso had also been entrusted as a pupil to Flaxman's care. In 1799 Hayley addressed one of his inevitable epistles to the sculptor, and the following year this appeared with three illustrations, two of which, doubtless on Flaxman's recommendation, had been given to Blake to engrave. On Cowper's death in 1800 Hayley was easily persuaded to become

the biographer of his friend the poet, and entrusted Blake with the engraving of the illustrations. The delicate Alphonso, whom Hayley liked to style "my youthful Phidias", suffered from curvature of the spine and died a fortnight after Cowper. The first letter that Hayley received from Blake is a touching and characteristic letter of sympathy. It accompanied a design after a portrait medallion by Flaxman of the unfortunate young man. Blake concluded his condolences with these words :

I am a companion of angels. May you continue to be so more and more ; and to be more and more persuaded that every mortal loss is an immortal gain. The ruins of time build mansions in eternity.

What was Hayley to make of this new friend ? With the record of Hayley's life before him Southey was afterward to write : " Everything about the man is good except his poetry." On his relations with Blake posterity is fully informed. Is there anything in what follows to modify Southey's opinion ?

When Flaxman introduced Blake to Hayley he was following up a recommendation that he had made many years before. On the earlier occasion Flaxman had quoted the opinion of Romney that Blake's historical drawings were equal to those of Michael Angelo. The recommendation could not have come to Hayley more tactfully supported. It was in May 1800 that Blake sent his letter of condolence, and Hayley's impulsive reply took the form of suggesting that Blake should live at Felpham while the proposed engravings for Hayley's life of Cowper were in progress. This flight to Sussex would also enable Hayley, as Gilchrist says, " to push Blake's fortunes by introducing him to his

numerous well-connected friends". The scheme was approved by everyone, and Thomas Butts, a disinterested friend, believed that Blake's fortune was made.

By September the matter was arranged, and Blake's account of his journey by coach, and of the excitements of the expedition, make a very pleasant page in his correspondence. On the eve of his departure he wrote a letter to Flaxman beginning: "It is to you I owe all my present happiness." The letter ends with the often quoted lines:

When Flaxman was taken to Italy, Fuseli was given to me  
for a season,  
And now Flaxman hath given me Hayley his friend to be  
mine.

Mrs. Blake also wrote a delightful letter to Mrs. Flaxman, in which, catching her husband's style as she had absorbed much of his nature, she said: "The swallows call us, fleeting past our window at this moment. O how we delight in talking of the pleasure we shall have in preparing you a summer bowyer at Felpham!" The letter encloses some lines from her husband. They reveal the spirit in which his new patron appeared to him:

The bread of sweet thought and the wine of delight  
Feeds the village of Felpham by day and by night;  
And at his own door the blest Hermit does stand,  
Dispensing unceasing to all the whole land.

To Hayley himself the exultant poet wrote:

My wife is like a flame of many colours whenever she  
hears Felpham named. My fingers emit sparks of fire with  
expectation of my future labour.

Blake's cottage still stands hardly more than a

stone's throw from the beach, and save for neighbouring bungalows almost unaltered. His first impressions shall be given in his own words :

We are safe arrived at our cottage (he wrote to Flaxman on his arrival), which is more beautiful than I thought it and more convenient. It is a perfect model for cottages and, I think, for palaces of magnificence, only enlarging and not altering its proportions, and adding ornaments and not principals. Nothing can be more grand than its simplicity and usefulness. Simple without intricacy, it seems to be the spontaneous effusion of humanity, congenial to the wants of man. No other formed house can ever please me so well ; nor shall I ever be persuaded, I believe, that it can be improved either in beauty or in use. Mr. Hayley received us with his usual brotherly affection. I have begun to work. Felpham is a sweet place for study, because it is more spiritual than London. . . . And now begins a new life.

In this happy frame of mind, equally evident in a letter posted two days later to Butts, the three Blakes, for his sister was one of the party, settled into their cottage within sound of the sea. Blake rented it for twenty pounds a year from the landlord of the Fox Inn, and thus for all but work done was independent of his patron.

From the beginning of their intercourse Blake's regard for Hayley was never more than personal. Ten days later he wrote a poetical letter to Butts, which, he says, is not such as those that Felpham produces by his new friend and neighbour. He was almost forced to this comparison because one of his first tasks was to illustrate a ballad that Hayley had composed during the preceding weeks. In addition to the unfinished commissions for Butts that he brought with him from London, Blake undertook the "delightful study" of

the heads of the poets which were destined to form a frieze for Hayley's new library at Felpham. These are now to be found in the Manchester Art Gallery. The new library at Felpham was part of a marine cottage with a turret that Hayley had built to his own design, and to this he retired for the sake of economy while the big house at Eartham was let. It was in this cottage that Alphonso had died, and Hayley continued to inhabit it until his own death in 1820. The winter and the following spring passed busily for Blake in these pursuits, to which miniature painting was soon added. This was one of Hayley's favourite arts, and as it was then much in favour Hayley's plan was to persuade his neighbouring friends to give Blake their commissions for miniatures.

In Hayley, therefore, Blake found an unusual country squire, and he discovered a new source of happiness in the open country, of which he now became an inhabitant for the first time in his life. He could overlook the sea from his upper windows, and Bognor was then hidden by two windmills perched upon an intervening neck of land. The back of Blake's cottage looks inland toward the Downs, and allusions in Blake's letters suggest that bathing and walking, of which last he had always been fond, were among the delights of his new existence. Not far from the Fox Inn, near the centre of the village, was Hayley's marine cottage. Behind, the lanes threaded the fields to the foot of the Downs, and the road that passes Blake's door brought him in a few moments to the sea. Except in summer, the flat country between the village and the Downs has few attractions, and it was upon the beach or overlooking the sea from the coast path then running along

it that Blake saw most of his visions and dreamed his dreams. The cottage to this day has only a narrow front garden, which lies like the house at right angles to the road. "Last night", he told a lady, "I was walking alone in my garden; there was great stillness among the branches and flowers, and more than common sweetness in the air. I heard a low and pleasant sound, and I knew not whence it came. At last I saw the broad leaf of a flower move, and underneath I saw a procession of creatures, of the size and colour of green and grey grasshoppers, bearing a body laid out on a rose-leaf, which they buried with songs and then disappeared. It was a fairy's funeral."

For human society he had Hayley and Hayley's county friends, who sat or gave commissions to him for miniatures. Blake seems to have satisfied his sitters, for Hayley, no doubt echoing the general opinion, remarked that Blake had "wonderful talents for original design" and would often execute these "very happily". He also gave drawing lessons to Lady Bathurst's children at Lavant, and might have been retained at a fixed salary if he had consented to paint whatever she happened to want. His complacency recoiled, however, when she asked him for a set of hand-screens, but this seems to have been the only commission that he refused. There were also evenings in Hayley's library, where his host would read aloud and set Blake to study Greek that he might appreciate Hayley's renderings of Homer. Thus the winter and spring passed contentedly away. In May 1801 Blake wrote to Butts:

Mr. Hayley acts like a prince. I am at complete ease. But I wish to do my duty, especially to you, who were the



precursor of my present fortune. I never will send you a picture unworthy of my present proficiency. I soon shall send you several. My present engagements are in miniature painting. Miniature has become a goddess in my eyes, and my friends in Sussex say that I excel in the pursuit. I have a great many orders, and they multiply.

The ballad of Hayley's that Blake had illustrated on his arrival was a broad sheet written with the charitable desire to relieve the mother of "Little Tom the Sailor", whose heroism it celebrated. It was sold for her benefit, and it sold well. Naturally pleased, Hayley now determined to employ his pen for the benefit of Blake himself, and with this idea before the end of 1801 he composed a set of ballads. Blake was to illustrate these, and a Chichester bookseller was to publish them for the artist's benefit. The two men had now been intimate with one another for a year, and yet Hayley did not falter. His belief that his "Ballads on Anecdotes relating to Animals" could be fitly offered to the author and artist of the *Songs of Innocence*, that the vigorous spirit at his doors, whose "orders multiplied", would step into the shoes of the poor woman, a fit subject of charity, was a singular example of want of tact. As if to show their disapproval, the Muses never left Hayley less inspired, and Blake was saved from embarrassment when the project also proved a financial failure. Nonetheless Blake maintained good relations with the infatuated man, who wrote more justly than he knew when he enlarged upon Blake's "inestimable patience". At present the triumphs of temper were all on Blake's side, but he would let himself go on his walks to the ladies at Lavant.

About this time, as Blake dates it in a letter to Butts written a year later, he was on his way thither

Remembering the verses that Hayley sung  
When my heart knocked against the roots of my tongue,  
when a "frowning thistle" caught his eye. It became the focus of the inner conflict that possessed him. At once transformed by his imagination, it became the symbol of the double life that he was forced to lead.

For double the vision my eyes do see,  
And a double vision is always with me.  
With my inward eye, 'tis an old man grey ;  
With my outward, a thistle across my way.

The thistle brings to him the reproaches of Los. He must choose, he is told, between his spiritual friend, Butts, and Hayley his unwitting enemy. The difference between them was that Butts would accept the work that Blake himself chose and valued, whereas Hayley tied him down to the drudgery he did not like, and dismissed Blake's personal ideas with polite disapproval. Hayley was anxious to help by making Blake useful. Butts had the finer desire to be helpful. In a beautiful passage Blake describes the sacrifice that Los demands of him :

My hands are labour'd day and night,  
And ease comes never in my sight.  
My wife has no indulgence given,  
Except what comes to her from heaven.  
We eat little, we drink less ;  
This earth breeds not our happiness.

The "defiance" of Los, he goes on, fills all human souls with trouble, but the "arrows of thought" began to fill his mind as the flames of the visible sun, the invisible Los, fell upon him. A fourfold vision is his reward in this moment of illumination, and while he

knows that the double sight will always be his, the lines end with the prayer that God will keep him from the deception of the outward eyes. On his return he probably seemed unusually "lively" to Hayley, who may have written the letter from which this adjective is taken after seeing Blake revived by one of these walks.

Now helping Hayley in the transcription of his life of Cowper, Blake gives in his turn his opinion of his patron. He speaks of Hayley's "matchless industry", and evidently tries to surpass it by a forced concentration on his own tasks :

I labour incessantly (he writes). I accomplish not one half of what I intend, because my abstract folly hurries me often away while I am at work, carrying me over mountains and valleys, which are not real, into a land of abstraction where spectres of the dead wander. This I endeavour to prevent ; I, with my whole might, chain my feet to the world of duty and humility.

Are not some of Hayley's counsels reproduced for us here ? It was almost exactly a year since his arrival in Felpham when these words were wrung from a poet who could not be indefinitely bound, but he had hardly yet realised that his immediate duty was the enemy. So the work went on, and Blake and Hayley compared Cowper's translation of the *Iliad* with the original Greek "every evening". Blake was thus spending his leisure no less than his working hours under Hayley's eye, and it says much for the manners of both men that their intimacy was apparently unclouded. The lion and the lamb lay down together, for the lamb-like Hayley knew not who was in his lair. Hayley was busy writing epitaphs. He could not suspect that posterity would read his own in the lines that Blake

was to let slip in private two years later. The poet was still "our excellent Blake", and Hayley was not aware that Blake excelled at epigram. It was not even as if the ill-assorted pair had still to find each other out, for Hayley never did find out the man beside him.

The engravings to the life of Cowper still continued, but correctness and industry dominated them. Cowper's hares and the weather house described in *The Task* are more characteristic, for in these Blake was trespassing at last on the borders of his peculiar and enchanted field. Nature herself was giving warning that all was ceasing to be well, for Mrs. Blake began to suffer from rheumatism, and even Blake discovered the cottage to be damp. At the close of his second winter Blake wrote to Butts in a letter dated January 1802 :

When I came down here, I was more sanguine than I am at present ; but it was because I was ignorant of many things which have since occurred, and chiefly the unhealthiness of the place. Yet I do not repent of coming on a thousand accounts ; and Mr. H., I doubt not, will do ultimately all that both he and I wish—that is to lift me out of difficulty. But this is no easy matter to a man who, having spiritual enemies of such formidable magnitude, cannot expect to have natural hidden ones. . . . Our expenses are small, and our income from an incessant labour fully adequate to these at present. . . . But patience ! If great things do not turn out, it is because such things depend on the spiritual and not on the natural world ; and if it was fit for me, I doubt not that I should be employed on greater things. . . . But whatever becomes of my labours I would rather that they should be preserved in your greenhouse (not, as you mistakenly call it, dunghill) than in the cold gallery of fashion. . . .

My unhappiness has risen from a source that, if explored too narrowly, might hurt my pecuniary circumstances ; as my dependence is on engraving at present, and particularly

on the . . . I have in hand for Mr. H. ; and I find on all hands great objections to my doing anything but the mere drudgery of business, and intimations that, if I do not confine myself to this, I shall not live. This has always pursued me. . . . The thing I have most at heart—more than life, or all that seems to make life comfortable without—is the interest of true religion and science. And whenever anything appears to affect that interest (especially if I myself omit any duty to my station as a soldier of Christ) it gives me the greatest of torments. I am not ashamed, afraid, or averse to tell you what ought to be told—that I am under the direction of messengers from heaven daily and nightly. But the nature of such things is not, as some suppose, without trouble or care.

Butts had been inquiring into the cause of Blake's uneasiness, and the whole letter should be read to its fine conclusion ; it culminates in the resolve " not to remain another winter here ". Was it that Hayley never perceived the strain that Blake was undergoing, or had he done his best to crush such restiveness as he observed ? It is impossible not to contrast the tasks which he was imposing with the disinterested encouragement of Butts. A postscript to this very letter thanks Butts for *proposing* to exhibit two of Blake's pictures. The warnings of Hayley and his circle no doubt encouraged the energies that they repressed. Meantime Hayley reports that Blake was " becoming a Grecian ", and he now enrolled Blake to overcome Lady Hesketh's objections to the " simple and graceful ornaments " which Hayley wished to place on Cowper's tomb. An upright Bible was to support *The Task* on the top of a slab of marble. Hayley had sent this design to Flaxman, and Blake was said to have copied it and approved. An important emendation was made to this design before it was finally carried out. The

position of the books was reversed. *The Task* was now made to prop the Bible, a nicety that Hayley had "heedlessly" overlooked.

By March 1802 the *Life of Cowper* was finished, and thus the work for which Blake had settled at Felpham was now at an end. During the summer Hayley's ballads, in two quartos, were passed through the press, but not even the summer weather was enough to revive Blake's spirits. Both he and his wife fell ill with fever, and his recovery placed him once more at Hayley's disposal. In the autumn Romney died, and Hayley planned, with Blake's assistance, yet another biography. The book was not written, however, and we have no letters to tell us how Hayley was employing Blake during the ensuing year. The gap is bridged by his correspondence with Butts, to whom Blake writes in the middle of November, probably with his recent work in miniature in mind :

I have now given two years to the intense study of the art which relates to light and shade and colour, and am convinced that either my understanding is incapable of comprehending the beauties of colouring or the pictures which I painted for you are equal in every part of the art, and superior in one, to anything that has been done since the age of Raphael.

He finds a letter of Sir Joshua's to support his own belief that "uniformity of colour and a long continuation of lines produce grandeur". Butts receives a noble response to his own insight :

Be assured, my dear friend, that there is not one touch in these drawings and pictures but what came from my head and my heart in unison ; that I am proud of being their author, and grateful to you my employer ; and that I look upon you as the chief of my friends whom I would

on the engravings I have in hand for Mr. H. ; and I find on all hands great objections to my doing anything but the mere drudgery of business, and intimations that, if I do not confine myself to this, I shall not live. This has always pursued me. . . . The thing I have most at heart—more than life, or all that seems to make life comfortable without—is the interest of true religion and science. And whenever anything appears to affect that interest (especially if I myself omit any duty to my station as a soldier of Christ) it gives me the greatest of torments. I am not ashamed, afraid, or averse to tell you what ought to be told—that I am under the direction of messengers from heaven daily and nightly. But the nature of such things is not, as some suppose, without trouble or care.

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endeavour to please, because you, among all men, have enabled me to produce these things.

Though Blake was spending a third winter in Felpham, a different note is heard when he turns to his personal affairs. "I have been very unhappy", he says, but he has burnt the letters in which he has told Butts of this. "Portrait painting", on which most of his commissions depended, "is the direct contrary to designing and historical painting in every respect. If you have not nature before you for every touch, you cannot paint a portrait; and if you have nature before you at all, you cannot paint history. It was Michael Angelo's opinion and is mine." This discovery, which justified to himself his continual restiveness under the "drudgery of business", and proved to him that he was not losing his gifts, lifted the heavy cloud from his mind. With its departure his native buoyancy returned. He is no longer unhappy.

I am again emerged into the light of day; I still and shall to eternity embrace Christianity, and adore Him who is the express image of God; but I have travelled through perils and darkness not unlike a champion. I have conquered and shall go on conquering. Nothing can withstand the fury of my course among the stars of God and in the abysses of the Accuser.

In these words, written on November 22, 1802, the spiritual form of the Hermit of Earham is at last deciphered from his human disguise.

Yet the winter passed very much in the manner of its predecessors, and in the following March we find Blake still in attendance at Hayley's library. The news of the death of Klopstock, misnamed the Milton

of Germany, led Hayley to pull down the *Messiah* from his shelves that he might translate to Blake the third canto. Hayley's interest in German had been re-awakened by the arrival of German renderings of his own works, which were presented by the translators to the flattered author. It was not, however, Hayley's poetry that proved at last too much for Blake's docility. Hayley's presence, Hayley's orders, Hayley's blind insistence on uncongenial task were much. Hayley's fussy benevolence, Hayley's polite disapprobation toward the work that filled Blake's mind, were becoming an oppression, but it does not seem to have been until Blake was asked to paint the set of hand-screens that he actively rebelled. This was the first commission that he ever refused in his life. The limit had been reached. He must abandon Hayley or his own visions would forsake him. His decision is dispatched in a letter to Butts with the certainty that his best friend will congratulate him.

On April 25, 1803, he tells Butts that he is

grateful to the kind hand that endeavours to lift me out of despondency, even if it lifts me too high. And now, my dear sir, congratulate me on my return to London with the full approbation of Mr. Hayley and with promise. But, alas ! now I may say to you—what perhaps I should not dare to say to anyone else—that I can alone carry on my visionary studies in London undismayed, and that I may converse with my friends in eternity, see visions, dream dreams, and prophesy and speak parables, unobserved, and at liberty from the doubts of other mortals ; perhaps doubts proceeding from kindness ; but doubts are always pernicious, especially when we doubt our friends. Christ is very decided on this point : “ He that is not with me is against me.” There is no medium or middle state ; and if a man is the enemy of my spiritual life while he pretends

to be the friend of my corporeal, he is a real enemy ; but the man may be the friend of my spiritual life while he seems the enemy of my corporeal, though not *vice versa*.

Blake goes on to say that everyone " who hears of my going to London again applauds it as the only course for the interest of all concerned in my works ", and a light is thrown on his private hours at Felpham, hours presumably limited to the night, by reference to " the spiritual acts of my three years' slumber on the banks of the ocean ". These are contained in " a long poem ", the *Milton* and possibly the *Jerusalem*, which must have occupied his time whenever Hayley's work, or Hayley's company, or the local gentry did not claim it. If he had replied to Hayley's reading aloud by venturing on some passages from either of these works the scene between the alternate auditor and reader can be readily imagined. It is fair to remember that we hear from Hayley no complaints, only a pained wonder, sincere, if vapid, praise, and some benevolent concern for Blake's financial future.

When Blake confides to Butts the completion<sup>6</sup> of this " long poem ", he says : " I rejoice and tremble : ' I am fearfully and wonderfully made ' ", thus claiming the character of his latest creation. He seems to have sat down to answer Butts's previous letter on the day of its arrival, and he had been reading the 139th Psalm a little before. He identifies himself with the Psalmist. He sees the face of his Heavenly Father who " gives a blessing to all " his work, and, in a mood of enthusiasm, for which he asks to be excused, Blake appropriates the cadences of this psalm. He says that he will sing of the Lord so that the dragons of the deep may praise him, and those that dwell in darkness, and in the sea-

coasts. It is a self-portrait. We see the cottage near the sea, the intent reader, the laying down of the Bible as his eyes flash with enthusiasm at these words.

Early in July Blake writes again :

The prospect of returning to our friends is supremely delightful. Then I am determined that Mrs. Butts shall have a good likeness of you, if I have hands and eyes left ; for I am become a likeness-taker, and succeed admirably well.

What had become of all these miniatures ? How near his forgotten sitters came to immortality at his hands ! His recent practice in portraiture reveals what he had learned : your portrait " is not to be achieved without the original sitting before you for every touch, all likenesses from memory being necessarily very, very defective ; but Nature and Fancy are two things, and can never be joined, neither ought anyone to attempt it, for it is idolatry and destroys the soul ". He repeats to Butts that Mr. Hayley is " quite agreeable " to their departure, perhaps because the Hermit is deeply occupied with his Cowper projects, the subscription for which " goes on briskly ". Cowper's notes to Milton and Cowper's translations of Milton's Latin and Italian poems are further to be " ornamented with engravings " by Romney, Flaxman, and Blake himself, and there is every sign that Blake will continue to be employed on everything connected with this edition that Hayley proposes to have illustrated. Thus Blake was to recover his freedom of mind, to quit a society that damped his spirit, and yet to retain the engraving by which he lived. To have gained this compromise without estranging his patron was a triumph of temper

on Blake's part. It was with a sense of relief that he writes to Butts, when all was settled :

I hope that all our three years' trouble ends in good luck at last, and shall be forgot by my affections, and only remembered by my understanding—to be a memento in time to come, and to speak to future generations by a sublime allegory, which is now perfectly completed into a grand poem.

It was over this poem that the rub had been felt. After praising it, as one to whom it had been dictated, Blake confessed :

Of this work I take care to say little to Mr. H., since he is as much averse to my poetry as he is to a chapter in the Bible. He knows that I have writ it, for I have shown it to him, and he has read part by his own desire, and has looked with sufficient contempt to enhance my own opinion of it. But I do not wish to irritate by seeming too obstinate in poetic pursuits. But if all the world should set their faces against this, I have orders to set my face like a flint (Ezekiel, iii. 8) against their faces and my forehead against their foreheads.

From this we can guess that Blake would turn for comfort to the Bible when Hayley was more than usually exasperating. Its influence, with that of Swedenborg and even of Milton, was always unfortunate. Blake needed the poets who were not apocalyptic, and Chaucer inspired him to better writing, as the Elizabethan lyrists had done. Hayley's influence was even worse, for, unlike Chaucer's, it was not complementarily opposed, but, perhaps contemptuously, antagonistic, and thus confirmed the very idiosyncrasies that a finer critical sympathy might possibly have modified. As it was, he irritated the artist too : "As to Mr. H. ", the letter continues :

I feel myself at liberty to say as follows upon this ticklish subject. I regard fashion in Poetry as little as I do in Painting : so, if both Poets and Painters should alternately dislike (but I know the majority of them will not) I am not to regard it at all. But Mr. H. approves of my designs as little as he does of my poems, and I have been forced to insist on his leaving me, in both, to my own self-will ; for I am determined to be no longer pestered by his genteel ignorance and polite disapprobation. I know myself both poet and painter, and it is not his affected contempt that can move to anything but a more assiduous pursuit of both arts. Indeed, by my late firmness, I have brought down his affected loftiness, and he begins to think I have some genius ; as if genius and assurance were the same thing ! But his imbecile attempts to depress me only deserve laughter. I say thus much to you, knowing that you will not make a bad use of it. But it is a fact too true that, if I had only depended on mortal things, both myself and my wife must have been lost. I shall leave everyone in this country astonished at my patience and forbearance of injuries upon injuries ; and I do assure you that, if I could have returned to London a month after my arrival here, I should have done so.

We must allow a little for accumulated irritation here.\* The earlier letters indicate at least six months of unruffled composure, in the enjoyment, no doubt mainly, of the cottage, the country, and the sea. The biting epigrams that he confided to his notebook were never meant for any other eye than his own, and, as they are unforgettable, it becomes necessary to insist how scrupulous and discreet he was in behaviour, even in his intimate letters to his friend Butts. It is possible that Hayley's urbane example was of value here, and tempted Blake, always highly susceptible, to surpass him in suavity.

He had not immediately returned to London, he goes on to explain, because

I was commanded by my spiritual friends to bear all and be silent, and to go through all without murmuring, and, in fine, [to] hope till my three years should be almost accomplished ; at which time I was set at liberty to remonstrate against former conduct, and to demand justice and truth ; which I have done in so effectual a manner that my antagonist is silenced completely, and I have compelled what should have been of freedom—my just right as an artist and as a man. And if any attempt should be made to refuse me this, I am inflexible, and will relinquish any engagement of designing at all, unless altogether left to my own judgment, as you, my dear friend, have always left me ; for which I shall never cease to honour and respect you.

The break had come, but, as we shall see, Blake was scarcely to have left Felpham and to have escaped from Hayley's presence, when he was glad to testify to Hayley's good qualities again.

The summer of 1803 was now well on its way. In May war had been declared on Napoleon. Hayley was busy preparing a third volume of Cowper's letters. Blake had finished six engravings for the *Triumphs of Temper* after designs by Flaxman's sister, Miss Maria, and was further employed, for his own delight, with illuminating *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. By August all seemed ready for his final departure for London, when an unexpected bombshell broke on the quiet cottage. The story, told in two letters to Butts, reveals Blake for the second time in his life in active collision with the public authorities. One reason why his letters are so excellent is that, as he tells Butts, he usually made rough drafts before completing and posting them.

It seems that Blake employed a jobbing gardener, and that one day this man, without asking leave, called in a dragoon, John Scholfield, to help him. Surprised

to find a stranger there, Blake asked the man politely to go. He "made an impertinent answer", and, when Blake insisted, refused. After words had passed between them, the man began to swear and threaten, whereupon Blake took him by the elbows and pushed him into the road. There the man struck an attitude, and began to swear and threaten again. "Perhaps foolishly", Blake stepped out of the gate, put aside his blows, and, taking him once more by the elbows, ran the man in front of him as far as the Fox Inn, where he was quartered. The noisy resistance of the fellow attracted several neighbours, including other soldiers, to the spot. Blake's landlord, the host of the inn, then appeared and compelled the dragoons to go indoors. They became abusive, and uttered threats which seemed idle until the arrival of a warrant for Blake's arrest on the charge of using seditious words and insulting the king. Blake had several witnesses that the soldiers, a privileged class since the declaration in May, never accused him of sedition when in front of the inn, but he only took the gardener with him when he came before the bench at Chichester, and so the soldier's statement could not be challenged. He was therefore sent to gaol, for the military insisted that the charge should be pressed, and was forced to find bail.

Hayley came forward with £100, a Chichester printer with £50, and Blake bound himself in another £100 to appear at Quarter Sessions after Christmas. "You see, my friend", Blake wrote, "I cannot leave this place without some adventure. It has struck a consternation throughout all the villages round. Every man is now afraid of speaking to, or looking at, a soldier. . . . Such is the present state of things, this



foolish accusation must be tried in public." Blake was not easily intimidated, but Mrs. Blake was "much terrified". He had once worn the red cap, and if this were recalled, in the state of public nervousness, it might be serious.

Scholfield was said to be a disgraced sergeant, and when the trial took place at Chichester the following January, before the radical Duke of Richmond, he and his friends had concocted an elaborate charge. They declared that, among other treasonable expressions, the accused had said: "Damn the King's soldiers; they are all knaves. When Bonaparte comes, it will be cut-throat for cut-throat, and the weakest will go to the wall. I will help him!" and so forth. Hayley briefed counsel for the defence of Blake, and attended in person to give evidence. Once, during Scholfield's examination, Blake cried out "false" in a voice that electrified the court, and Gilchrist mentions an old man who had been present in his youth through his eagerness to see Hayley, the great man of the neighbourhood, but his only memory of the trial was Blake's flashing eye. Blake was acquitted, and the verdict was received with applause, for the court was filled with neighbours ready to back Hayley, and to confound the soldier by testimony to Blake's habitual gentleness!

In honour of the acquittal Hayley planned a social evening. The only cloud that remained was the illness of Blake's counsel, Samuel Rose, which overcame him in court, and from which he never recovered. The effect of Hayley's generosity was to bury Blake's sense of irritation, and when he told Butts that Hayley was about to stand by him, he concluded: "Burn what I have peevishly written about any friend."

## CHAPTER VIII

### "MILTON" AND "JERUSALEM"

TOWARD the end of September 1803 Blake and his wife left Felpham for 17 South Molton Street, but for the next two years he was still busy with commissions for Hayley, whose good offices over the trial could no longer be obscured by personal intimacy. Distance confirmed the peace between the two men, and, except for Blake's presence at the trial itself, there was next to no chance of their meeting. Correspondence was, indeed, an arduous duty, and when we contrast Blake's studious politeness with his private exclamation :

I write the rascal thanks till he and I  
With thanks and compliments are quite grown dry,

we feel that the weight of the Hermit's hand was still upon him. It is curious how little they were able to help each other's work. Hayley gave to Blake no opportunity that he valued, and when Blake agreed to enrich Hayley's later publications with engravings, his plates were unable to attract any public to them. The rising of the romantic star was robbing Hayley's rush-light of all sparkle. Taste had changed. Blake was still ahead, and Hayley had now fallen behind it.

We have now to return to the work that had occupied Blake's private energies during their quaint association.

Possibly his reaction from the drudgery of business, of listening to Hayley's vapid verse, of concern with conventional art and society in many forms, encouraged Blake to the opposite excess. It would be an irony worthy of the Muse if Hayley is to be blamed for the characteristics of *Milton*. Klopstock was the only new poet who had come his way at Felpham, and his tendencies were already fixed. The "long poem descriptive of the spiritual acts of my three years' slumber on the banks of the ocean", of which Blake had written to Butts in April 1803, was eventually called "*Jerusalem: the Emanation of the Giant Albion*, 1804. Printed by W. Blake, South Molton Street." This, like the *Milton*, was finished, or at any rate engraved and pressed, after his return to London. Examples of both poems, dated by the water-marks upon the paper, occur from time to time during the next sixteen years. *Jerusalem* is a large quarto of illuminated printing, and contains one hundred pages of writing and designs. Both are confined to one side of each leaf. The opening address to the public contains the defence of the measure already quoted on page 86. Here, as elsewhere in the prophetic books, the prose to be found in places is as lucid and burning as the "verse" is frequently measureless and obscure. While it is impossible to believe Blake's assertion that "every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place", there can be no question that the substance is genuine. The method has nothing to recommend it. Blake was not a systematic thinker, and in attempting to create a system he created confusion. He wanted to be more symbolical and more systematic than his predecessors, and handicapped himself un-

necessarily by endeavouring to invent both. "I must", he had said in an unfortunate moment, "create a system or be enslaved by another man's." His system, then, had to be no less original than his symbolism. Yet there is a radical difference between the two elements that Blake was proposing to combine. Symbols are valuable because they are more pregnant than any system. We value symbols because they are not systematic, and systems because they are more orderly than symbols can be. Symbols can be given a resemblance to system only when they are perfectly familiar, and in the course of ages have received a traditional and largely fixed meaning. The endeavour to combine the virtues of two principles which are opposed to each other resulted in combining the defects of both.

The consequence is that all interpreters of Blake devote three-quarters of their efforts to his method, and when they have deciphered enough to prove that he meant something resent the suggestion that the meaning could have been expressed much better in another and more traditional way. Neither the lines that he used, the symbols that he invented, nor the system that he endeavoured to create are models for anybody. They are the aberrations of his genius, not its fruits, and if he had left nothing else, no one would read them. The prophetic books, in fact, are incapable of summary. Yet the commentaries upon them will continue to increase in number because the interest of detective minds and the impulse of curiosity are common in some degree to us all. Those who have most nearly succeeded in deciphering the symbolism have not brought us enough to show that the labour is

worth the pains. There is no development of thought. The machinery revolves ; the epithets repeat themselves ; the names change ; the symbolism proliferates ; Blake becomes as nearly unreadable as it is possible for a writer to be. The reader then has no choice but to be content with Blake's lucid passages, or to devote his life to a cross-word puzzle. The most satisfactory guides so far have been Mr. Paul Berger, whose thick volume *William Blake, Poet and Mystic* tracks Blake patiently, and Mr. Foster Damon, whose *William Blake : his Philosophy and Symbols* is even thicker and more detailed. In these books intelligence, industry, and research have done their best, but the systematic knowledge that they have pieced together will, in its turn, seem to some less fruitful, except in orderly arrangement, than the poetic intuition, admittedly incomplete, of such interpreters as Mr. Yeats and Mr. Ellis, which finally lead us to the lucid passages of Blake himself. For, when all is said, when one has read Mr. Berger and followed Mr. Foster Damon to their conclusions, the explanations only suffice. They do not satisfy. No analysis, no cross-reference, no meditation can convince an impartial student of letters that Blake's symbolic system is not arbitrary. The theme we feel to be real, the vision penetrating, but there is no reason but Blake's misguided caprice for presenting it in his fashion. Its defects are more glaring than its qualities. The understanding is illuminated or darkened ; the feelings are roused and repelled, but understanding and feeling are never so long convinced together as to make us exclaim that the matter in this manner was inevitable. This qualification is the unanswerable demur that meets

those commentators who claim for Blake's prophecies an equal place with the greatest of mystical writings.

Blake's major prophecies have little to do with literature, and, his main idea in them having been, I trust, sufficiently indicated in previous pages, it is to this little that I shall now limit myself.

To begin with *Milton*. In the preface "Homer and Ovid, Plato and Cicero" are opposed to "the sublime of the Bible", and a new age is foreshadowed in which the Daughters of Memory shall become the Daughters of Inspiration, as if tradition itself were not one of the principal inspirations of mankind! As Mr. Sturge Moore has observed, "Blake's education was wretched, and his genius makes its inadequacy horribly obtrusive; he was too impatient ever to feel the force of ignorance, while the power of his mind made it easy for him to despise accepted conclusions". We are next more fruitfully reminded that there are "hirelings in the camp, the court, the university, who would, if they could, ever depress mental, and prolong corporeal, war". "We do not want", says Blake, "either Greek or Roman models if we are to be just and true to our own imaginations, those worlds of eternity in which we shall live for ever in Jesus our Lord." In Blake's day such a reaction was probably inevitable, but he overshot the balance, as this preface itself proves. This mood, which makes poor argument, creates, however, the lovely lyric beginning

And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green ?

which has adorned so many title-pages and perorations. The Invocation tells us more of the "dark Satanic

mills " that had already begun to cover England. They are taken to be the visible forms of the worship of morality, which all the mystics from Bunyan to Shelley have named the negation of religion. On this earth

Satan, making to himself laws from his own identity,  
Compell'd others to serve him in moral gratitude and sub-  
mission,  
Being call'd God,

so that people

In his synagogues worship Satan under the Unutterable  
Name.

Milton pursues his journey through the realms of the Muses, and laments what Blake was himself lamenting there. He sees Albion, deadly pale upon the Rock of Ages, stretched in death. He also meets Los " fallen from the eternal bosom ", and then encounters Swedenborg, who is wittily called " strongest of men, the Samson shorn by the churches ". Next he speaks of Whitefield and Wesley, and declares that there can hardly be a greater miracle than the appearance of these enthusiasts in eighteenth-century England. Mr. Charles Gardner has attempted to do justice to the influence of these religious romantics upon Blake's heart and mind. Had they not, too, devoted " their life's whole comfort to entire scorn and injury and death " ? Their two trumpets summon Albion to awake. War, the winepress of Los, is said to be " the printing press ", which seems prophetic, and around it sport, in a welcome return to poetry,

the centipede,  
The ground-spider with many eyes, the mole clothed in  
velvet,  
The ambitious spider in his sullen web, the lucky Golden-  
spinner.

A little later the moment of poetic inspiration is thus described :

Every Time less than a pulsation of an artery  
Is equal in its period and value to Six Thousand Years ;  
For in this period the Poet's Work is done ; and all the great  
Events of Time start forth and are conceiv'd.

The song of spring occasions the following delightful lines :

Thou hearest the Nightingale begin the Song of Spring :  
The lark, sitting upon his earthy bed, just as the morn  
Appears, listens silent ; then springing from the waving  
cornfield, loud  
He leads the Choir of Day—trill ! trill ! trill ! trill !  
Mounting upon the wings of light into the great Expanse,  
Re-echoing against the lovely blue and shining heavenly  
shell ;  
His little throat labours with inspiration ; every feather  
On throat and breast and wings vibrates with the effluence  
Divine ;  
All Nature listens silent to him, and the awful Sun  
Stands still upon the mountain looking on this little Bird  
With eyes of soft humility and wonder, love and awe.

The flowers are similarly celebrated, and Blake is rewarded for his instinctive return to natural beauty which his conscious intelligence despised. We soon return to the familiar contrast between imagination and reason in a passage unusually beautiful and clear :

I come in Self-annihilation and the grandeur of Inspiration ;  
To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour,  
To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration,  
To cast off Bacon, Locke, and Newton from Albion's  
covering,  
To take off his filthy garments and clothe him with Imagina-  
tion ;  
To cast aside from Poetry all that is not Inspiration,  
That it shall no longer dare to mock with the aspersion of  
madness  
Cast on the Inspired by the tame high finisher of paltry  
Blots  
Indefinite or paltry rhymes.



Other passages might be quoted, but enough is here to show that *Milton*, while happily free from mythological encroachments, is but a restatement of Blake's now familiar theme. Repetition had become his refuge.

*Jerusalem* starts with a prose passage recording his awakening from his "three years' slumber on the banks of the ocean", and restates his favourite doctrine. "The spirit of Jesus is continual forgiveness of sin: he who wants to be righteous before he enters into the Saviour's Kingdom, the Divine Body, will never enter there." May it not be said that since man learns by experience, and one incapable of this is generally defined as a fool, sin is as necessary to the salvation of fallen beings as friction is to the movement of a wheel. In morality, as in other kinds of mud, the wheels revolve without progression. This prose concludes with the defence of the measure in which the prophetic books are written that was already given on page 86.

The work proper almost begins with the criticism of good and evil that had already occupied him in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. This is followed by the declaration that he must create a system or be enslaved by another's. The England of his days is presented under the "iron scourges of Bacon and Locke", and he addresses Jerusalem in cadences that suggest the Bible and the prophets to have been his models. He tells us that :

Jerusalem is nam'd liberty  
Among the sons of Albion,

and after a prose passage "to the Jews", in which he confuses early religions with customary recklessness,

we come upon a long lyric which threads the names of London's boroughs, then outlying villages, in verse after verse. When we read of

The Jew's-hair House and the Green Man,  
The Ponds where boys to bathe delight,  
The fields of cows by William's farm,  
Shine in Jerusalem's pleasant sight,

it is pleasant to remember that Shelley about this time was sailing his paper boats at Hampstead. The book is further broken by a prose address "to the Deists", the quatrain on the spectre of reason in whose power we are born till our humanity rises to cast it from us, and the lyric ending with the famous verse beginning "for a tear is an intellectual thing". It constantly returns to the principle of the forgiveness of sin, on which we read :

Doth Jehovah forgive a debt only on condition that it shall  
Be payed ? Doth he forgive Pollution only on condition of  
Purity ?  
That debt is not forgiven ! That Pollution is not forgiven !  
Such is the Forgiveness of the Gods, the moral virtue of  
Heathen, whose tender mercies are cruelty.

After pages in which the sequence of thought is not apparent, we come upon the great prose address "to the Christians", which, as the reader will recall, is one of the most eloquent even in Blake's writings. It was given almost in full on page 104. We are again reminded that "the worship of God is honouring His gifts in other men", and Blake says :

I have never made friends but by spiritual gifts,  
By severe contentions of friendship, and the burning fire of  
thought.

And determined to push his gospel of imagination to

its end, he warns the moralists : “ Go ! put off holiness and put on intellect ”, and, toward the end he says :

And if God dieth not for Man, and giveth not Himself  
Eternally for Man, Man could not exist ; for Man is Love,  
As God is Love ; every kindness to another is a little Death  
In the Divine Image ; nor can Man exist but by Brotherhood.

It will be seen, then, that there are some very fine things in *Jerusalem*, and that the thought is not wholly or very largely disfigured by the symbolism that Blake had invented. Like its fellows, however, it has no orderly method, and is rather a rhapsody on his favourite themes than a development of these. It stops rather than ends organically.

## CHAPTER IX

LONDON ONCE MORE, 1804-1809

BLAKE began to engrave these two prophetic books in 1804, a year that began auspiciously with his acquittal. This engraving seems to have been his principal occupation, for no other work is recorded, save in his letters to Hayley, until the quarrel over his designs for Blair's *Grave*. This immense task must have been a mental holiday for him, since he was spending the bulk of his time and energy upon work conceived and written by himself, with no thought beyond the satisfaction of the impulse that was driving him. It is remarkable, too, from what has survived, how, once these writings were engraved, Blake's imagination became absorbed in his art. The ensuing years are mainly filled with painting and with writings arising out of it.

He is as happy to be back in London as he had been to leave it for the sea, and he writes as freshly of the streets as he had written of the Sussex lanes and shore. He is even exultant enough to tell Hayley, in a letter written three days after the trial, that his "heart and soul are more and more drawn out towards you, Felpham, and its kind inhabitants". He also tells the insistent man that he is going briskly on with the plates and that he finds everything promising for work in

abundance. "If", he adds, "God blesses me with health, I doubt not yet to make a figure in the great dance of life that shall amuse the spectators in the sky." He was also busy upon inquiries for the projected life of Romney. He may have been thinking of the voluntary and involuntary engraving on which he was now engaged when he tells Hayley that he "curses and blesses engraving" alternately. He must have had mixed feelings, too, over the stream of little commissions and big compliments that every mail-coach was carrying to and fro between them. The trouble that Blake took to procure materials for Hayley's new biography is extraordinary. All through the summer of 1804 this foraging for Hayley continued, and the only trace of feeling on Blake's part is a passing reference to a Mr. Spilsbury, who, he writes, "may be a much better painter if he practises secretly and for amusement than he could ever be if employed in the drudgery of fashionable daubing for a poor pittance of money in return for the sacrifice of art and genius". Even in these letters we see how Blake's mood would transform his memory, for in the famous one of October 23, in which he records his visit to the Truchsessian Gallery of pictures, he tells Hayley that he is "eternally indebted to Felpham for my three years' rest from perturbation and the strength I now enjoy". Felpham's inhabitants had nearly damped Blake's spirit. It was the pictures of which he was still full that explained the transformation, pictures which he interpreted to justify his own discouraged dreams :

Suddenly, on the day after visiting the Truchsessian Gallery of pictures, I was again enlightened with the light

I enjoyed in my youth, and which has for exactly twenty years been closed from me as by a door and window-shutters. Consequently I can, with confidence, promise you ocular demonstration of my altered state on the plates I am now engraving after Romney, whose spiritual aid has not a little conduced to my restoration to the light of art. . . . Dear Sir, excuse my enthusiasm or rather madness, for I am really drunk with intellectual vision whenever I take a pencil or graver into my hand, even as I used to be in my youth, and as I have not been for twenty dark, but very profitable, years.

The pictures that wrought this exultation in Blake were a collection exhibited by an Austrian Count, who represented them to be the relics of his fortune, lost through the French Revolution. Nothing afterwards was heard of it, and the authenticity of the works by various old masters may be questioned. He promises Hayley that his new illumination shall appear in his forthcoming engravings. His water-colour "The River of Life" has been attributed to this time. He was also in request once more for a work with a popular appeal, and it is well to give Blake's story of the arrangement before any trouble was anticipated by him.

On November 27, 1805, Blake tells Hayley of his latest commission in these words :

Mr. Cromek, the engraver, came to me desiring to have some of my designs ; he named his price and wished me to produce him illustrations of *The Grave*, a poem by Robert Blair ; in consequence of this I produced about twenty designs, which pleased so well that he, with the same liberality with which he set me about the drawing, has now set me to engrave them.

That is explicit enough. Cromek, however, probably thinking that Blake's designs would be more popular if they were at least engraved in the fashionable style

that Blake detested, repented. Audaciously announcing that "your drawings have had the good fortune to be engraved by one of the first artists of Europe", he passed on Blake's designs to Schiavonetti. By this act Blake was deprived of the most valuable part of his commission, besides suffering a breach of contract.

Cromek, who had been a pupil of Bartolozzi, had done many engravings after Stothard, but, anxious to make money more quickly, he wished to become a dealer himself. Without capital, he must risk everything on a popular success, and, therefore, he decided to start with an illustrated edition of Blair's poem. In 1805 he issued a prospectus in which the name of Blake appears as the proposed designer and engraver, backed by the approval of Fuseli and eleven Academicians. Cromek was adept at smoothing the path for his own ventures, and left no resource unused that could aid success. The book appeared with a preface in which Cromek thanked everyone except Blake, who is mentioned only as the subject of Mr. Philips's portrait. Even Fuseli, who contributed a cautious introduction, never mentioned by name "the author of the moral series" that he was recommending. Their technique and execution, he remarks, "claim our approbation, sometimes our wonder, and not seldom our fears, when we see him play on the very verge of legitimate invention". These were the only designs of Blake to be generally known in his lifetime. Cromek, who had probably met Schiavonetti in Bartolozzi's studio, could hardly have told Blake what he was doing, for he continued to visit him, and one day he chanced to see in Blake's room a drawing of Chaucer's "Canterbury Pilgrims".

Once more attracted by a sketch that promised popularity if it were engraved by a fashionable hand, Cromeek asked for a finished design. Blake's suspicions by this time were aroused or confirmed. He declined to sell unless the commission included the engraving of the design, and, still heedless of any written agreement, he believed that this was understood. Cromeek, however, hurried off to Stothard, suggested the subject to him, and commissioned him to paint a picture of it for sixty guineas. It is not suggested that Stothard knew that the original idea was Blake's, much less that he was at work upon it, nor did Blake suspect anything when he saw the picture in Stothard's studio. But when he learned that Stothard's was to supersede his own, he was naturally indignant with Cromeek, and excusably fancied that Stothard was privy to the substitution. Cromeek, therefore, robbed Blake of one commission, two ideas, and an old friend, since the breach with Stothard was never healed, though Blake twice endeavoured to be reconciled.

When Stothard's picture was exhibited in 1807 it excited widespread interest, which Cromeek fanned in every way he could. He further added insult to injury in an offensive letter that he wrote to Blake at this time :

Your drawings have had the good fortune to be engraved by one of the first artists in Europe, and the specimens already shown have already produced you orders that I verily believe you otherwise would not have received. Herein I have been gratified ; for I was determined to bring you food as well as reputation, though, from your late conduct, I have some reason to embrace your wild opinion that to manage genius, and to cause it to produce



good things, it is absolutely necessary to starve it ; indeed, this opinion is considerably heightened by the recollection that your best work, the illustrations of *The Grave*, was produced when you and Mrs. Blake were reduced so low as to be obliged to live on half-a-guinea a week.

Blake vented his disgust in the well-known epigrams in which Cromek takes the place of Hayley on the whipping-stool. He decided to challenge a comparison, and to paint, exhibit, and engrave his own design.

When the illustrations to Blair were published, the names of nearly six hundred subscribers to the volume appeared, and, despite the only contemporary and contemptuous review, it remains the single work of Blake's that came near to popularity. To Cromek and the engraver it brought a welcome profit. Blake himself received twenty guineas for his designs. The critic of *The Examiner* found in them "an appearance of libidinousness" ; but they were thought at the time to combine a literal yet imaginative rendering of religious truths. The best are the "Reunion of the Soul and Body" and the "Last Judgment". The difference between the designs and the poem is as the difference between sculpture and the monumental masonry that the flat verse suggests.

Another book, published almost simultaneously, with a frontispiece designed by Blake and engraved by Cromek, was *A Father's Memoirs of his Child*, by Dr. B. H. Malkin, the headmaster of Bury Grammar School. The frontispiece, for which Blake's engraving had been rejected in favour of Cromek's, displays the infant prodigy who read, painted, learned languages, made maps of imaginary countries, and died before the

age of seven. Blake's commendation of the child's drawings is quoted by the enraptured father, who refers to Blake himself as an "untutored proficient". The volume lives now for the valuable account of Blake's early years that is contained in the prolix dedication to Thomas Johnes, Froissart's translator. Blake declared "the little boy to have had that greatest of all blessings, a strong imagination, a clear idea, and a determinate vision of things in his own mind". The child had died in 1802, while Blake was still at Felpham, and it was probably Cromek, who engraved the frontispiece, who introduced Blake to the father. It would be interesting to know how Dr. Malkin obtained his knowledge of Blake's life, which in its rambling way is detailed and invaluable.

When Blake himself wanted to do a good turn to a fellow-artist, he was much less half-hearted than his own would-be friends. To the *Monthly Review* of July 1, 1806, he wrote a generous defence of Fuseli's picture, "Count Ugolino", which on its exhibition in the Royal Academy had been attacked in *Bell's Weekly Messenger*. Two years later Blake was to exhibit there himself for the fifth and last time in his life. ~~These~~ pictures were "Christ in the Sepulchre guarded by Angels", and the "Jacob's Dream" with its fine conception of the spiral staircase. In 1807 he was at work on an enlargement for the Countess of Egremont of the design for the "Last Judgment", which had been the most elaborate of his illustrations to Blair. To Ozias Humphry, the miniature painter, who had procured him this commission, Blake wrote a letter with a detailed description of the work. In the following December he thanked George Cumberland for

ordering on a friend's behalf "a complete set of all you have published in the way of books coloured as mine are". Blake says that :

It is impossible for me to return [to my old channel] without destroying my present course. New varieties, or rather new pleasures, occupy my thoughts. New profits seem to arise before me so tempting that I have already involved myself in engagements that preclude all possibility of promising anything. I have, however, the satisfaction to inform you that I have myself begun to print an account of my various inventions in art, for which I have procured a publisher, and am determined to pursue the plan of publishing what I may get printed without disarranging my time, which in future must be devoted to designing and painting.

This plan was never realised, though it suggests the *Descriptive Catalogue* printed the following year (1809).

In the May of that year Blake printed a prospectus of the engraving of Chaucer's "Canterbury Pilgrims", in which the following interesting paragraph appears :

It is hoped that the Painter will be allowed by the public (notwithstanding artfully disseminated insinuations to the contrary) to be better able than any other to keep his own characters and expressions ; having had sufficient evidence ~~in~~ in the works of our own Hogarth that no other artist can reach the original spirit so well as the Painter himself, especially as Mr. B. is an old, well-known, and acknowledged graver.

This was Blake's defence against the treatment to which Cromeck had subjected him ; the only answer that he could make to the news that Schiavonetti had been commissioned to engrave a plate from Stothard's picture of the "Canterbury Pilgrimage". He may have been spurred thereto by a prospectus that Cromeck had added to the edition of Blair, inviting subscriptions

to an engraving after Stothard's picture, which Cromek had already exhibited throughout the country.

Blake's picture was bought by Mr. Butts, and Blake resolved to see whether its exhibition would equally benefit him. He had none of Cromek's commercial astuteness, and in May 1809 he opened an exhibition of his works at the house of his brother James, the hosier in Broad Street. In this secluded corner nine "frescoes" and seven drawings were shown. The cost of admission was half a crown, which included the famous *Descriptive Catalogue*. The only publicity given to the affair was the news of the quarrel between him and Stothard, and the rivalry of the two artists may have brought a few visitors to the quiet house. One was Crabb Robinson, who told Gilchrist that "on entering the room I found myself alone". He bought four copies of the *Catalogue* and gave one of them to Charles Lamb. James Blake told Crabb Robinson, on being asked if he might come a second time: "Oh yes, free as long as you live!" Crabb Robinson, who is the exhibition's best reporter, records Lamb's opinion that "Blake's description was the finest criticism he had ever read of Chaucer's poem". In a later letter (dated May 15, 1824) addressed to Bernard Barton, Lamb wrote:

the painters in oil . . . he affirms to have been the ruin of art. . . . His pictures, one in particular, the "Canterbury Pilgrims" (far above Stothard's) have great merit, but hard, dry, yet with grace. He has written a Catalogue of them, with a most spirited criticism on Chaucer, but mystical and full of vision. His poems have been sold hitherto only in manuscript. . . . There is one to a Tiger . . . which is glorious. But, alas! I have not the book, for the author is flown, whither I know not, to Hades or

a madhouse. But I must look on him as one of the most extraordinary persons of the age.

Though the works shown were only sixteen in number, Crabb Robinson states in his diary that they filled "several rooms of an ordinary dwelling-house", and of those lost (Nos. 7, 8, 9, 10, 16) the "Ancient Britons" seems to have been Blake's largest work; the figures, in his own words, were "full as large as life". Soon after the exhibition the estrangement between Blake and his brother went so far that they ceased to speak, yet without his aid Blake might never have been able to arrange one.

As the exhibition was intended to counter Cromek's travelling exhibition of Stothard's picture, so Blake was also resolved to engrave his own, and on opening the exhibition he printed the prospectus from which we have quoted.

The *Descriptive Catalogue* is one of Blake's important prose writings. There is the description of his own picture, virtually an essay on Chaucer; a defence of the Florentines against the Venetians; and his comments and descriptions of the other works contain some of his most famous opinions. Grouping these together we find Blake preaching clearness and precision, and by clearness he means "clear colours unmuddied by oil, and firm and determinate lineaments unbroken by shadows, which ought to display and not to hide the form". After some assertions on the origin of the arts which are tiresome because expressed in pseudo-historical terms, Blake reverts to his favourite basic principle: "The Greek Muses are daughters of Mnemosyne or Memory, and not of Inspiration or Imagination." With the essay on

Chaucer, as we may take leave to call it, Blake produces the nearest approach to orderly criticism that he ever achieved. On the solid foundation of Chaucer's precise characters, Blake's sympathetic imagination builds securely, and that this should have been the effect of a non-mythological poem by an author of human interests shows how greatly Blake would have benefited in his boyhood by the study of classical literature. How just, and yet how like Blake, is the following general reflection :

The characters of Chaucer's pilgrims are the characters which compose all ages and nations : as one age falls, another rises, different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the same ; for we see the same characters repeated again and again in animals, vegetables, minerals, and in men ; nothing new occurs in identical existence. Accident ever varies : substance can never change or decay. . . . Chaucer is himself the great poetical observer of men. . . . Every age is a Canterbury Pilgrimage.

Half way through the essay Blake defends his own practice and criticises the rival picture and his rival's prospectus, both of which he was determined to surpass. He establishes his own careful study of the poem with complete ease, and has little difficulty in showing that Stothard misunderstood or had never carefully read it. He ends his essay on a personal note, more moving than his invective : " I have been scorned long enough by these fellows, who owe me all that they have ; it shall be so no longer."

It is in regard to number 4, " The Bard ", from Gray, that Blake asserts " poetry consists in [sublime] conceptions ". Then comes the famous passage :

A spirit and a vision are not, as modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour or a nothing : they are organised

and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing eye can produce. He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing and mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all. The painter of this work asserts that all his imaginations appear to him infinitely more perfect and more minutely organised than anything seen by his immortal eye.

The word "all" is too strong. Blake was impatient of second thoughts, and, as Rodin told Mr. Symons, should have looked more than once at the visions, whose fleeting passage too often sufficed him. On number 8 Blake refers to Swedenborg: "The works of this visionary are well worthy the attention of painters and poets: they are foundations for grand things." A later comment attacks the "demons" Titian, Rubens, and Correggio, and the famous conclusion giving "the great and golden rule of art as well as of life" has been quoted at length in an earlier chapter.

As a critic of art Blake is a valuable instance of a writer who cannot properly be understood until the reader has related him to his age and background. The danger has been that of his becoming a cult, a supposed fountain of authority. He is an inspirer ~~rather~~ rather than a guide, and even his wise sayings, of which there are many, owe more than is always admitted to the splendid lyrical gift that phrased them. In a public already interested in his work and personality, such a catalogue as this would have created a sensation. To one indifferent or contemptuous, as Blake's was, it seemed to provide excuses for neglecting him.

We must couple with the *Descriptive Catalogue* the Public Address that was never printed. It seems to have been written in 1810, in the autumn of which year the engraving of Blake's "Canterbury Pilgrims"

was ready. Gilchrist reminds us that this engraving was finished well in advance of Stothard's, and that in his turn Stothard was indignant at having been forestalled. The main contention of the Public Address is that "engraving, by losing drawing, has lost all character and expression", and in proof the reader is asked to compare the prints of Bartolozzi, Woollett, and Strange with "the old English portraits". With fine audacity Blake even asserts that it was through his own engravings of Stothard's print that Stothard gained "his reputation as a draughtsman". Much of the Address is occupied with an indignant defence of himself against his detractors, especially an anonymous writer in *The Examiner*, the only paper to notice Blake's exhibition at all. The contemptuous references to "an unfortunate lunatic" can be left where they lie. The strange thing is that the writer remained unmoved by the concluding words of the *Catalogue*, which he quotes :

If a man is master of his profession, he cannot be ignorant that he is so ; and, if he is not employed by those who pretend to encourage art, he will employ himself, and laugh in secret at the pretences of the ignorant, while he has every night dropped in his shoe, as soon as he puts it off, and puts out the candle, and gets into bed, a reward for the labours of the day such as the world cannot give, and patience and time await to give him all that the world can give.

Blake's answer to his anonymous traducer was to criticise the best known of his real or supposed enemies, after which he makes the following reflections : "Commerce cannot endure individual merit" ; "Empires flourish till they become commercial, and then they are scattered abroad to the four winds".



Again : " It is not arts that follow and attend upon empire, but empire that attends upon and follows the arts." These are succeeded by the fine aphorism that puts heart into the loneliest of writers : " When I tell any truth, it is not for the sake of convincing those who do not know it, but for the sake of understanding [? encouraging] those who do." Here, too, is his definition of painting as " drawing on canvas ", and his evident object was to defend the school of engraving in which he was trained. His bitter personal comments are robbed of offence when he tells us with perfect sincerity : " Resentment for personal injuries has had some share in this Public Address, but love for my art and zeal for my country a much greater." Blake also complains that painting is deprived of the opportunity given to sculpture for public work, and, like the Romantic that he was, he calls painting the " principal art ". He sums up the verdict of his contemporaries on his works in the phrase : " He can conceive but he cannot execute." His reply : " I am, like others, just equal in invention and execution ", leaves us free, on his own ground, to attribute his faults to one or the other.

The remarks collected under the general title " A Vision of the Last Judgment ", by way of additions to Blake's catalogue of pictures, are noteworthy for the magnificent contention :

Men are admitted into Heaven not because they have curbed or governed their passions or have no passions, but because they have cultivated their understandings. The treasures of Heaven are not negations of passion, but realities of intellect, from which all the passions emanate in their eternal glory. The fool shall not enter Heaven let him be ever so holy. Holiness is not the price of entrance

into Heaven. Those who are cast out are all those who, having no passions of their own because no intellect, have spent their lives in curbing and governing other people's by the various arts of poverty and cruelty of all kinds. . . . In Hell all is self-righteousness.

His concluding remark upon his " Last Judgment " is this :

I question not my corporeal or vegetative eye any more than I would question a window concerning a sight. I look through it, not with it.

Blake's declaration : " Painting, as well as poetry and music, exists and exults in immortal thoughts ", was the voice of the new Romantic Movement, and it is to proclaim personal inspiration that his artistic manifestoes were designed. They are not so much criticism as a creed, a creed directed against a now academic tradition. He defended sin because it was an assertion of personal passion, and it is curious to observe now, when the Romantic Movement has spent itself and the eighteenth century is coming into repute again, that the century which Blake heralded was to close on the same note. The intense reaction that Blake was leading explains most of his defects, and should be remembered to condone them. Inspiration was belittled in his day, but to identify inspiration with art, as Blake did, is to exaggerate idiosyncrasy and to claim finality for ideas that may have no more than peculiarity and impatience to recommend them. Even Mr. Symonds admits at last that Blake's art " is a record of vision that has not been thoroughly mastered ".

## CHAPTER X

1810-1818

WITH the painting and engraving of the "Canterbury Pilgrimage" Blake entered on the last period of his life. This falls, however, into two divisions. Of the first, which ended with his introduction to John Linnell, we know very little. Mr. Butts, the purchaser of the "Canterbury Pilgrimage", continued to buy Blake's work, but the years are years of public neglect, and a generation seemed to pass with the death of several of Blake's friends or former intimates. Among these were Johnson, the bookseller, and Ozias Humphry. Even Hayley, who lived till 1820, ceased to put in an appearance. He was writing his Memoirs, and, having no need of Blake to help him by researches or engraving, he appears to have had no further use for his old friend. The word "use" is probably justified, for Hayley was one of those people who like to help others when these can be made useful, but have less desire to be helpful to them, which is the true disinterestedness. Gilchrist attributes to this time the remark of George III.: "Take them away, take them away", when some of Blake's drawings were shown to him. The engraved copies of *Milton* and *Jerusalem* were issued from South Molton Street about this time, and the "Everlasting

Gospel " is attributed to it. Many other manuscripts, since burnt or disposed of by Tatham, were also probably composed, and Blake's tireless industry spent itself also on innumerable water-colours. According to his wife, Blake was always " reading, writing, or designing ", and he seemed no longer to feel the need of physical exercise. The old habit of long walks had been abandoned, and, according to J. T. Smith, " often in the middle of the night he would, after thinking deeply upon a particular subject, leap from his bed and write for two hours or more ".

Beside his own pursuits, Blake still worked at engraving, among other things, and, on Flaxman's recommendation, upon Flaxman's designs for Hesiod's *Works and Days*. He also engraved some plates for Rees's *Encyclopædia* to illustrate articles, believed to be by Flaxman, on armour and sculpture. One of his subjects for the latter series was the Laocoon, and in order to draw direct from the cast at the Royal Academy Blake went to the drawing school, where Fuseli found him at work among the pupils. " What, you here, Mr. Blake ! " said the keeper, " we ought to come and learn of you, not you of us." Blake received Fuseli's friendly welcome with a cheerful reply, and, according to Tatham, exulted to find himself once more in the class-room.

This is the only rift of light in these years of obscurity, which lasted until George Cumberland, of Bristol, introduced Blake in 1818 to John Linnell. He was then a young artist making a living by painting portraits, while devoting his leisure to landscape. Linnell seems to have applied to Blake for help in the engraving of his portraits, and he finished the plates which Blake

began for him. Linnell was now twenty-six years old. His father, a carver and gilder, had encouraged his precocious talent and sent him first as a pupil to Benjamin West. He left him to spend a year with John Varley, the water-colour painter, in whose house he made the acquaintance of Shelley and Godwin. It was not to these, however, that he introduced Blake, but to Varley himself, a curious creature whose interests were divided between art and astrology. The two men found much in common, and Linnell has left a spirited drawing of the pair arguing with one another. In two directions Linnell was to prove the most helpful friend of Blake's old age. He commissioned a duplicate set of the "Inventions to Job", which Butts had ordered, the designs for Dante, and for each he paid to Blake £150; he also introduced him to several young artists who gathered round Blake and became a little band of disciples. His two commissions were the largest that Blake ever received for a single series of designs. Linnell's success as a portrait painter enabled him to command large prices also for the landscapes, by which he is best remembered at the present day. He took a house in Rathbone Place, already familiar to us as the home of Mrs. Mathew, in the autumn of 1817, and moved the next year to Cirencester Street, Fitzroy Square. Some autobiographical notes, quoted by Mr. Arthur Symonds, record Linnell's first meeting with Blake.

Here I first became acquainted with William Blake, to whom I paid a visit in company with the younger Mr. Cumberland. Blake then lived in South Molton Street, Oxford Street, second floor. We soon became intimate, and I employed him to help me with an engraving of my

portrait of Mr. Upton, a Baptist preacher, which he was glad to do, having scarcely enough employment to live by at the prices he could obtain; everything in Art was at a low ebb then. . . . I soon encountered Blake's peculiarities, and, somewhat taken aback at the boldness of some of his assertions, I never saw anything the least like madness, for I never opposed him as many did, but being really anxious to fathom, if possible, the amount of truth which might be in his most startling assertions, generally met with a sufficiently rational explanation in the most really friendly and conciliatory tone.

This glimpse of Blake, which is well worth having, comes from a letter written by Linnell's son, Mr. John Linnell, communicated to Mr. Symons by Mr. Sampson. We learn from his journal that Linnell paid several visits with Blake to the British Museum and to various picture galleries, and apparently introduced several clients to Blake, including Sir Thomas Lawrence.

Among these new acquaintances the man whose mind had a certain affinity to Blake's own was Varley, already known for the fatal accuracy of his horoscopes and forecasts. Gilchrist says that "he cherished a passion for the marvellous, and loved to have the evidence of his senses contradicted". In him Blake found an eager and sympathetic listener, ever hoping to share the visions that Blake would describe. Since he had not that faculty, however, he asked Blake to draw what he saw, and this request resulted in the visionary heads, whose existence is known to everyone. "The Man who built the Pyramids" and the "Ghost of a Flea" are the most familiar, and Varley would suggest subjects to Blake for the fascination of watching him draw these invisible sitters. From ten o'clock at night till the early hours of the morning the two are

said to have been engaged at this task, for Varley could never overcome his wonder at the prompt exclamation "There he is!" with which Blake would hail any character named to him. If any criticism was ventured upon these portraits, Blake's answer would be: "It's all right; I saw it so"; and we can guess how greatly Varley would have liked to be able to confirm or to correct the likenesses. All his simplicity could do was to record the name, the date, and the hour of the appearance of the visions. A typical entry is "Richard Cœur de Lion drawn from his spectre. W. Blake fecit, Oct. 14, 1818, at quarter past twelve midnight." These heads have the literalness of all Blake's transcripts. They show the visual quality of his imagination in whatever degree it was aroused.

Some of Blake's greatest works were reserved for the last years of his life. The designs for Dr. Thornton's edition of the "Pastorals of Virgil, adapted for schools", a fine series of seventeen woodcuts, were made in 1820, when he also began his great painting of the "Last Judgment". Once more Blake's work was to be introduced with an apology. Dr. Thornton prefaced his edition with these words:

The illustrations of this English Pastoral are by the famous Blake, the illustrator of Young's *Night Thoughts* and Blair's *Grave*, who designed and engraved them himself. This is mentioned as they display less art than genius, and are much admired by some eminent painters.

Indeed, had it not been for the approval of Lawrence, Ward, and Linnell, to whom Dr. Thornton showed the woodcuts, he would have yielded to the wishes of his publishers and had Blake's designs recut by members of their staff. Yet they include some of the most

imaginative and lovable transformations of nature that Blake has left us. That of the flattened corn beneath the moon is irresistible. Even in his lifetime Blake was to be finely praised by the few who ever praised him, and it is a pleasure to quote the effect of these designs for Virgil on a young artist with an imagination as responsive to the spiritual side of nature as Blake's own :

I sat down with Mr. Blake's Thornton's Virgil woodcuts before me. . . . They are visions of little dells and nooks and corners of Paradise ; models of exquisitest pitch of intense poetry. I thought of their light and shade, and looking upon them I found no word to describe it. Intense depth, solemnity, and vivid brilliancy only coldly and partially describe them. There is in all such a mystic and dreamy glimmer as penetrates and kindles the inmost soul . . . unlike the gaudy daylight of this world. They are like all that wonderful artist's works, the drawing aside of the fleshly curtain, and the glimpse . . . of that rest which remaineth to the people of God.

In this sense of enchantment we see the first of Blake's young disciples under his spell, for Samuel Palmer was only twenty in 1825, and there is the ardour of youth in his superlatives. When Palmer writes in his notebook : " Art is the standard of nature ", we hear an echo of Blake himself, and Palmer's own work is in the spirit of Blake's pastorals, pure in colour, rich in feeling, with a primitive innocence, and homely, as with the poetry of nature, an art of sunrise and sunset, never too far from the earth. Palmer and his fellows are the stepping-stones to the future pre-Raphaelites, a lovely bridge to men greater than themselves.

The engraving of *Jerusalem* was also finished in the year 1820, and Blake seemed to be settled in his quiet



corner and at the height of his artistic powers. Thus while his imagination could spend its highest energy on the "Last Judgment", always the theme of themes for him, he could return to the innocence of his earliest manner and rejoice us once more with his transfiguration of natural scenes. There has rarely been more beautiful designs for schoolboys than these in his edition of Thornton's Virgil, and it is the more remarkable because Blake was now working on wood for the first time. These designs were, however, his farewell task at South Molton Street, the last achievement there during his occupation of seventeen years.

Linnell explains how he came to leave his quarters for the last of his many London homes in 1821. "On his landlord leaving off his business and retiring to France", Blake moved to Fountain Court in the Strand, a site now rebuilt, but with its name still recorded on the corner of a building just east of the Savoy Hotel. Here Blake took a couple of rooms on the first floor in a house kept by Mr. Banes, his wife's brother-in-law. Blake was out of work and in want, for Linnell says that he had to part with his collection of old engravings to Colnaghi's at this time. Though too late to save them, Linnell came to the rescue, and it may have been at his instance that Blake received, in 1822, a grant of £25 from the Royal Academy. In these two rooms Blake spent the last six years of his old age. The front room was where he received his friends. The back was bedroom, kitchen, and work-room all in one. The window of this back room, in front of which Blake would sit while he worked, gave a glimpse between the houses of the river and the countryside beyond, and Blake would slip from his bed

to his table whenever his mind more than usually teemed. Crabb Robinson visited Blake here, and, however cramped the quarters, Samuel Palmer was at pains to correct the report of sordid poverty by declaring that all was neat and clean, and everything in its place. An old man now, Blake became a stay-at-home, and is said not to have left the Court for two years at a stretch except to fetch his porter from a tavern at its upper corner in the Strand. Among his visitors was Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, the dilettante and poisoner, though there is no record of Blake predicting his transportation as he had predicted Ryland's execution when he met him as a boy. Wainewright bought a copy of the *Songs of Innocence*, and mentioned him in a friendly way in one of his jaunty paragraphs in the newspapers. Blake is said to have admired one of Wainewright's pictures on the walls of the Royal Academy.

"While so many moments better worthy to remain are fled", Samuel Palmer wrote to Gilchrist, "the caprice of memory presents me with the image of Blake looking up at Wainewright's picture; Blake in his plain black suit and rather broad-brimmed, but not Quakerish, hat, standing so quietly among all the dressed-up, rustling, swelling people, and myself thinking: 'How little do you know who is among you!'"

There is no one now who will not cherish this vivid memory of the inventor of the marvellous designs to the Book of Job, with which at the moment he was probably busy. This was the last commission that he received from Butts, and in the interests of justice to his patrons it seems that even Butts did not always find Blake easy to manage. Of the designs themselves little

need now be said. Everyone knows them. Are there any greater illustrations to be found? They are Blake's most ambitious, most unchallengeable, series. His inspiration was never richer, and his execution never more consistently maintained. A peculiar quality of one design has made an unforgettable impression on the present writer since he first saw it many years ago. It is the design that accompanies the words: "With dreams upon my bed thou scarest me and affrightest me with visions." The sense of oppressive terror weighs on the raised hands of the sleeper, who seeks to fend the heavy figures that press upon him with a load of horror that is the imminence of nightmare itself. The effect of the Bible on the imagination of a child is rendered throughout, and we cannot see the figures of God, of the spirit, of Job and his friends without recognising how instinctively we used to think of them. The Job designs individually and collectively differ from much of Blake's work in that they are completely convincing. For once, we are spared any doubt as we turn from one wonderful page to another.

Blake made one set for Butts, and a duplicate set for Linnell, who paid for them by regular weekly sums of £3 or so, and thus gave Blake a regular income. Linnell generously went so far as to bind himself by a contract, dated March 23, 1823. It was perhaps the only agreement of the kind that Blake ever signed or was offered. By its terms Blake was to receive £100 for the designs and the copyright, and another hundred from the profits. When these were not forthcoming, Linnell paid Blake another £50 by instalments for keeping the designs and the unsold engravings in his

own hands. The instalment system shows that Linnell still had to be careful about money, and yet was willing to pay a price that no one else would give. Gilchrist suggests that Linnell, too, influenced Blake's style by introducing him to the work of engravers less severe than Basire, and that, after seeing examples of Bonosoni, Blake even questioned whether Basire had been the unimpeachable master for him. By the standard of the "Inventions to the Book of Job" it will be admitted that his writings, exquisite as his lyrics could be, rank below his designs. We have no work by him in poetry comparable to the Job series in grandeur of conception and beauty of form. Idiosyncrasy too often guided his pen, and there was no influence similar to Basire's to subdue it. His apprenticeship to engraving was the only educational discipline that he received, and thus his work as an artist is superior to his work as an author. The Job designs are equal in invention and execution, and there can be little doubt that a text to be followed was generally a discipline to Blake which benefited his work. As an illustrator to Chaucer, to Virgil, to Job he is great. To Blair he is sometimes wooden and sometimes wonderful. The "Last Judgment" is an illustration *in excelsis*, so are his best designs, the "Ancient of Days", the "Nebuchadnezzar", the "Elijah", to Biblical themes. His decorative borders to his own pages of illuminated printing are usually enchanted creations. When he surrendered wholly to his own inspirations, he produced work that either rises above or falls below his proper level. Always aiming at the sublime, and taking states of soul for his favourite province, he surprises us by the extremes to which he rose or descended, even in different places of the same

design. Making an idol of idiosyncrasy, he is both an inspiration and a warning, but it is by recalling the formalism that he opposed that we retain sympathy for his unevenness.

In 1825 Linnell commissioned Blake to make a series of designs for Dante, and with his customary enthusiasm Blake set to work, not only to draw but to learn enough Italian to enable him to follow the poem side by side with Cary's version. Like Butts, Linnell gave Blake congenial work and paid him regularly for it, a double service that only Butts and Linnell among Blake's patrons were generous enough to perform. Linnell, too, was an intimate friend, and among the houses to which he introduced Blake was Mrs. Aders's, a house frequented by artists and men of letters. Under her roof Crabb Robinson made Blake's acquaintance, and it may have been he whom Lamb heard reading aloud the *Tiger*. Linnell has a vivid recollection of "this impressive performance", and Linnell and Blake afterwards visited Crabb Robinson's and other fashionable houses.

At the beginning of *Jerusalem*, which was finally engraved in 1820, Blake had written "Poetry fettered fetters the human race", and one of his scraps written about this period of neglect was the eloquent saying: "I am hid". It was perhaps to find a sanction for his proud attitude of defiance that he turned to the Gospels in order to show in his next poem that defiance and independence were the true characters of Christ, his favourite symbol. When we ask ourselves how to describe Blake's religious ideas, we must agree with Mr. Symons that he was "a heretic of the heresy of Swedenborg". The "Everlasting Gospel", written

somewhere about 1810, which we examined at the end of his lyrical poetry, should not therefore be read simply as an attempt to arrive at a new and profounder divination of its subject, but at least in part as the product of his loneliest period, the extreme instance of Blake's habit of self-justification. Without this confidence, it is true, he might have despaired, but when an authoritative value is claimed for his utterances, and their power to dazzle is arresting in itself, it becomes essential to remember when and in what circumstances they were written. As poetry the "Everlasting Gospel" is self-sufficient: as interpretation its teaching must be measured.

In 1818 Blake re-engraved the "Gates of Paradise", and the proverbial couplets that he placed below his designs, first for children, then, as he came to describe them, for the sexes, are written in the same vein, and often embody similar ideas. The most typical of them is number 9. It shows a man setting a ladder on the earth, the top of which rests on the arc of the moon, and it bears the words: "I want! I want!" It is a commentary upon Blake's writings. His desires were his dogmas. He set his ladder at the moon.

Certain other of Blake's writings belong to this time, and can be conveniently taken together. In the year 1819 or thereabouts Blake, who knew that some people thought him mad, read Spurzheim's *Observations on Insanity*. He made two annotations upon the book, the more interesting of which runs:

Cowper came to me and said: "O that I were insane always. I will never rest till I am so. Oh that in the bosom of God I was hid. You retain health and yet are as mad

as any of us all—over us all—mad as a refuge from unbelief—from Bacon, Newton, and Locke.”

By unbelief Blake meant science, and all knowledge based upon the evidence of the senses. He was characteristically a poet in the supremacy which he attributed to intuition. Personal enthusiasm, because it is alive, was the final authority to the man who said: “What is now true was once only imagined”, and, again, “A firm persuasion that a thing is so” makes it true. The answer to the question: Was Blake mad? has been too often given by those who were anxious simply to argue for or against him. If we take the axiom of the late Dr. Charles Mercier, the alienist, that insanity is primarily known by disorder of conduct, and use the word mad as it is loosely used by laymen, then in principle Blake can be acquitted. In the face of lifelong difficulty and discouragement he lived a normal life, a life of incessant industry, a life that interfered with none, managing his affairs with scrupulous honour, and dying in poverty without a debt. This implies all those qualities of self-control, regard for others, hard work which, Dr. Mercier insists, are the positive proofs of a well-balanced mind. Blake’s conduct, as laymen understand conduct, passes the test. No action can be quoted against him, but when we pass from his actions to some of his words, to some of his drawings, and enter the more elusive sphere that is still conduct to the mental specialist, certain qualifications must be made. For example, Palmer tells us that “being irritated by the exclusively scientific talk at a friend’s house, which talk had turned on the vastness of space, he cried out: ‘It is false. I walked the other evening

to the end of the heath, and touched the sky with my finger.'” Being a poet, Blake expressed all his ideas in images. He had the dramatic imagination, but there is little question that he knew the limits of man’s “double vision”, and knew where the imagination ended and fact began. Between the “thistle” in front of him and the “old man grey” that it suggested to his imagination there was no confusion in his own mind. His visionary heads fall into the same imaginative category, but his own statement “I can look at the knot in a piece of wood till I am frightened at it” is typical of over-concentration, and certain of his drawings bear a family likeness to those observable in asylums. The upshot is that Blake’s mind displays traces of disorder, but never to the point of affecting his conduct in daily life. The medical man will insist on the more technical, the layman on the looser interpretation, and confusion results because both use the same word to express a great difference of degree. If Blake’s condition were made a test case for legislation, the world would have to acquit him in self-defence, but technically he cannot wholly escape the definition. At once lonely, uneducated almost in proportion to the greatness of his gifts, and unfairly disesteemed, everything in his circumstances combined to foster his idiosyncrasies. A weaker mind and a weaker character could hardly have survived the strains of Blake’s long and arduous life. We cannot call him mad without admitting that he was heroic, and we cannot admit him for a guide without allowance for the very limited and peculiar influences of his boyhood, influences that encouraged every latent peculiarity of his own.



It was at this period that Blake engraved his drawing of the Laocoon. The words inscribed about it include his definition: "Prayer is the study of art", quoted in an earlier chapter. Amid some reckless remarks on Homer and on Virgil, one is revealing: "Grecian is mathematical form: Gothic is living form." Blake's mind had some of the vitality and eccentricity of a Gothic grotesque, and Gothic was the only art with which he was really familiar. The *Ghost of Abel*, a short "revelation" etched in 1822, need not detain us except for the characteristic saying: "Nature has no outline, but imagination has."

The last literature that came Blake's way was the poetry of Wordsworth, which we find him reading and annotating in 1826, the year before he died. His first surprise must have been to find a true poet using nature as a symbol in much the same way as Blake used Christ. Here was a poet, whose faculty he did not question, reverencing the very entity, nature, that Blake scorned. It was exactly some such contrast, from an otherwise sympathetic artist, that Blake had needed in his youth, but Wordsworth came too late in Blake's life to revise any of his theories. Wordsworth only roused him to reassert his own dogmas. He challenged Wordsworth's demand for observation and sensibility, and declared: "One power alone makes the poet: imagination, the divine vision." Blake's general verdict is this: "I see in Wordsworth the natural man rising up against the spiritual man continually, and then he is no poet." Whereas Wordsworth found that natural objects called forth and increased the imagination in boyhood and early youth, Blake, who had spent his adolescence amid the Gothic

monuments of the Abbey, confessed that "natural objects always did and now do weaken, deaden, and obliterate imagination in me. Wordsworth must know that what he writes valuable is not to be found in nature." It is curious that Blake, the believer in inspiration, should in fact have drawn his early models from works of art, and come to identify inspiration with the forms that had been given to it by Gothic architects. Blake's early lyrics, his pastoral drawings, prove that a wider acquaintance with nature would have been valuable to him, for man does not live only by the word, and Blake's tendency as a writer is to offer us yeast for bread, and to suppose that the word which has not been made flesh is sufficient for us. Wordsworth's lines addressed "To H. C., six years old" won, however, Blake's complete approval. From first to last he read only to confirm, never to correct, his own intuitions. The result was that his intellect ceased to grow, and, like the prisoner in Carisbrooke Castle, it continued round and round in its revolving wheel and showed no development because no modification. He is an example of a writer whose critical faculty was in abeyance, to whom, for want of any standard of comparison, the miscellaneous knowledge that came his way was almost useless, and sometimes harmful. His authoritarian manner deludes those who infer that he had mastered the intellectual tools which he appropriated. It is as a poet, not least in his prose, rather than as a thinker, that Blake should be read.

The Job series was published in March 1826. The price was three guineas. Exactly a year previously Fuseli had died at the age of eighty-four, and the death

of this old friend leads us to turn to the new circle of younger artists whom Blake, through Linnell's influence, was beginning to gather about him, while busy to the last with the work that occupied his mind.

## CHAPTER XI

### DISCIPLES AND DEATH

SIX years after his first meeting with Blake, John Linnell left his London house for North End, Hampstead, where in 1824 he settled with his family in a house called Wyldes or Collins's Farm. It is near the Bull and Bush, a part of the Heath which, except on Bank Holidays, is even now remote and rural, though the advancing tide of houses from Golder's Green has begun to threaten its privacy from the further side. Linnell occupied five rooms at the farm, and there he and his wife and children would persuade Blake to walk from London. The welcome of the children who ran out to greet him helped to overcome the old man's antipathy to the air of Hampstead, for, having been used to the Surrey side in his own childhood, he declared that the northern heights always disagreed with him. Samuel Palmer, who lived at Broad Street, would often accompany Blake on his way, and another unnamed companion declared that to walk with Blake was "like walking with the prophet Isaiah". To the Linnell children he would recite his songs and tell of his visionary friends. He shared their games, and remained to the end one of their vivid recollections. "That is heaven", Blake said to a friend who drew

him to the window to watch some children at play ; and once, when a little girl was introduced to him at a party, Blake stroked her curls and said : " May God make this world to you, my child, as beautiful as it has been to me." In after life she said that she had thought it strange that the old artist in his shabby clothes could have found the world as beautiful as she did with her pretty frocks and cheerful nursery.

Mrs. Linnell would sit at the piano and sing Scottish songs, and Blake would listen with tears in his eyes or stand at the door enjoying the summer evenings. Sometimes he would sing himself, old ballads or his own songs to his own melodies. In winter Mrs. Linnell would wrap Blake in an old shawl, and her little daughter, then six years old, would tell Palmer's son and biographer how the servant with his lantern would be sent to guide Blake across the Heath to the main road.

Palmer has recorded his first meeting with Blake :

On Saturday, October 9, 1824, Mr. Linnell called and went with me to Mr. Blake. We found him lame in bed, of a scalded foot (or leg). There, not inactive, though sixty-seven years old, but hard-working on a bed covered with books, sat he like one of the antique patriarchs or a dying Michael Angelo. Thus and there was he making in the leaves of a great book (folio) the sublimest designs for his (not inferior) Dante. He said he began with fear and trembling. I said : " Oh, I have enough of fear and trembling." " Then ", said he, " yes, I do ". . . . My spirit sees his dwelling as it were an island in the midst of the sea—such a place is it for primitive grandeur, whether in the persons of Mr. and Mrs. Blake or in the things hanging on the walls.

Palmer also gives us a vivid description of Blake's appearance in his old age :

His eye was the finest I ever saw : brilliant, not roving, clear and intent, yet susceptible ; it flashed with genius, or melted in tenderness. It could also be terrible. Cunning and falsehood quailed under it, but it was never busy with them. It pierced them and turned away. Nor was the mouth less expressive ; the lips flexible and quivering with feeling. I yet recall it when, on one occasion, dwelling upon the exquisite parable of the Prodigal, he began to repeat a part of it ; but at the words " When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him " could go no further ; his voice faltered and he was in tears. . . . He saw everything through art, and in matters beyond its range exalted it from a witness into a judge.

There were congenial guests also, including Dr. Thornton and John Varley, who would argue with Blake about astrology, and find, no doubt, a listener who would push correspondences and inferences as far as he wished. But Blake thought, we are told, that genius could conquer the stars, in which opinion perhaps he showed a deeper understanding of astrology than his instructor. A more elusive member of the circle was Francis Oliver Finch, and the common quality that they possessed was an inability to see anything peculiar in Blake and his ways, an eager response to the spiritual quality of his art. Looking back on Finch, Samuel Palmer wrote : " He had imagination, that inner sense which receives impressions of beauty as simply and surely as we smell the sweetness of the rose and woodbine." Finch, who had been for five years one of Varley's pupils, was a water-colour painter, and Blake seemed to him " a new kind of man, wholly original and in all things. Whereas most men are at pains of softening down extreme opinions, not to shock those of others, it was the contrary with him." Blake's fascination, at least

in his prose, is still that which responds to the impulsive side of all of us, and the intellectual pleasure of his sayings is largely the pleasure of surprise. He kindled these young men, and thirty years later Palmer wrote to Gilchrist :

Blake once known could never be forgotten. He was an astonishment and inspiration to the last. He was energy itself, and shed around him a kindling influence, an atmosphere of life full of the ideal. To walk with him in the country was to perceive the soul of beauty through the forms of matter ; and the high gloomy buildings between which from his study window a glimpse was caught of the Thames and the Surrey shore, assumed a kind of grandeur from the man dwelling near them.

The early work of these men has, like their dispositions, a family likeness, a simple ecstasy, a feeling for " the morning of the world ", which seems as if Blake's imaginative vision of nature had budded into flowers, and that even without him the spiritual flame that moved Wesley would have quickened the arts. The pre-Raphaelites, whom they anticipated, transfigured the Middle Ages as these men transfigured nature, and the latter young men called themselves the Ancients and found in the immemorial occupations of rustic life the link that bound humanity to the golden age.

The host, John Linnell, was a curious character. He was as industrious, versatile, particular as a friend of Blake's should be. When he was not at work, painting portraits or giving lessons, the visitor would find him at his own flour-mill or kneading trough, for the family made its own bread and would not eat any baker's loaves. His big, bony hands, described for us by Palmer, were the hands of a fighter who made his own way, held his own opinions, and was intolerant of

opposition though a loyal friend. Dürer and Michael Angelo were his favourite masters, and he is the only one of Blake's disciples who seems to have influenced him. Though Linnell, unlike Blake, was a successful artist, his life was almost as severe and frugal as Blake's own.

Another member of the circle was Edward Calvert (1803-83), a "philosopher" to Palmer, a painter and wood-engraver to the world. It is pleasant to hear of him sitting under a tree in Rickley valley reciting one of Virgil's Eclogues to the pity of a stranger who overheard. Calvert could not bear to hear Palmer declaim the "British Grenadiers", and the two friends quarrelled for three days over its martial rhetoric. The son of a naval officer, Calvert began the study of art in a midshipman's cabin, and after losing a friend in action left the Navy to attend the Royal Academy schools. A small private income relieved him from an active struggle for a livelihood, and he introduced himself to Blake, and fell, if with less abandonment than Palmer, under his spell. He was the only one of the circle who had received a classical education, and alone among them travelled to Greece. The effect of this was to make him so fastidious that he destroyed many of his works, and his fellow-disciple George Richmond says that Calvert was "always stretching out his hand to grasp that which he could not attain". He married a wife like Mrs. Blake in this, that she would arise early in the morning to take a proof of an engraving over which Calvert and Palmer had spent the night at work. His "Cyder Feast" Palmer especially admired, and Blake's designs for Virgil answered to a taste already idyllic and set in that direction independently.



He seemed to Linnell to resemble the prophets, and, living to a great age, he pursued his chosen way undeterred by the practice of others or the neglect of his own work.

Within the last year of Blake's life Samuel Palmer left London for the village of Shoreham, near Seven-oaks, and there Blake and the rest joined him and his father, the bookseller. It was a picnic made in a carrier's cart, drawn by eight horses, a patriarchal progress that appealed to the imagination of them all. The expedition ended with a hunt for a ghost in Shoreham Castle, though the noise was traced to a snail tapping at a window. Another of Palmer's visitors was Frederick Tatham, whose destruction of some of Blake's manuscripts is sometimes allowed to obscure his genuine admiration and services to his friend. Frederick Tatham's father, the architect, was introduced to Blake by Linnell, and in this way the young man became one of the group. He walked with Blake and heard him tell of his visions. Blake always responded to youth, and young men were allowed to contradict him without exciting his ill-humour.

The youngest of the party was George Richmond, who was born 1809, and also lived to a great age. An imaginative boy of sixteen was a ready channel for Blake's influence, under which he came when meeting Blake at Linnell's house at Hampstead. Richmond's father was a miniature painter, and the young artist began to prove his discipleship by painting pictures on Biblical subjects in which the inspiration of Blake can be readily felt. None of these young men, however, was without individuality, and Richmond found his own way in the portraits by which he is best remem-

bered. In these there is little to prove his first influence, except that he became interested in the Tractarian Movement and chose such sitters as Cardinal Newman and Bishop Wilberforce to sit for him. His son, Sir William Richmond, who succeeded Ruskin as Slade Professor at Oxford, designed the mosaics in St. Paul's Cathedral. It was George Richmond whom Blake advised to pray when inspiration failed him, and Richmond who was told that Blake could look at a knot of wood till he was frightened at it.

With his visit to Shoreham Blake left London for the last time. His own health was failing, and his friends would come to his rooms in Fountain Court, which they called the House of the Interpreter. These visits were part of a plan by which the friends would meet once a month at their own houses in order to compare their sketches and designs. They were willing to forgo the friendship of other artists for Blake's company, and we are once more reminded of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood in their seclusion from the outside world. The old man had begun to suffer from shivering fits and stomach trouble in 1825, and the two concluding years of his life are recorded in his correspondence with Linnell, when he often has to explain why he is prevented from visiting him at Hampstead. These letters are still addressed to Cirencester Place, Fitzroy Street, which Linnell kept for his official studio. Crabb Robinson would also visit Blake, and his record of their conversations preserves the fine saying about Voltaire : that he was commissioned to expose the natural sense of the Bible, and that he told Blake : " I blasphemed the Son of Man, and it shall be forgiven me, but my enemies

blasphemed the Holy Ghost in me and it shall not be forgiven them."

As Blake's shivering fits became more frequent and his visits to Linnell more rare, in the summer of 1826 Linnell offered to take lodgings for Blake near his own house, which a growing family overflowed. Blake offers to come when the cold spell of that July shall be over, and says :

I intend to bring with me, besides our necessary change of apparel, only my book of drawings from Dante, and one plate shut up in the book. All will go very well in the coach, which at present would be a rumble I fear I could not pull through. So that I conclude another week must pass before I dare venture upon what I ardently desire—the seeing you with your happy family once again, and that for a longer period than I had ever hoped in my healthful hours.

A fortnight later he writes : " I have been in too much pain for thought ", and he is worried because Linnell was thinking of calling his latest boy William. Blake protests that he should be called Thomas, after a relation of Mrs. Linnell. Blake's Christian name was given to a younger son, who, like Thomas, became an artist. ~

On August 1 Blake went to Hampstead in " a cabriolet ", to avoid the fatigue of the coach. There he worked at the Dante drawings, and the young men would afterward refer to a clump of trees as Dante Wood. Before the end of December Flaxman was dead, and when Crabb Robinson called to sympathise, Blake said : " I thought I should have gone first ", adding, after a pause : " I cannot think of death as more than the going out of one room into another." This was Crabb Robinson's last visit, and, having satisfied

his curiosity to see how Blake would regard the death of Flaxman, the diarist thought that "there was nothing to be gained from frequent intercourse". After this interview he adds: "I was not anxious to be frequent in my visits." His record is vivid and faithful so far as it goes, for he was an attentive observer, besides buying some of Blake's work, which Blake was very reluctant to allow him to pay for.

Linnell's kindness was unfailing, and in the following February, when Blake was ill and in a condition that would have made it impossible for anyone with less vitality to work, Linnell offered to instal him and Mrs. Blake in Cirencester Place, where they were to live rent free as its custodians. Blake's reply is worth quoting:

I have thought and thought of the removal. I cannot get my mind out of a state of terrible fear at such a step. The more I think, the more I feel terror at what I wished at first, and thought a thing of benefit and good hope. You will attribute it to its right cause—intellectual peculiarity that must be myself alone shut up in myself, or reduced to nothing. I could tell you of visions and dreams upon the subject. I have asked and entreated Divine help; but fear continues upon me, and I must relinquish the step that I had wished to take, and still wish, but in vain. e

It was a tactful thought of Linnell to relieve his friend from the rent he might now find a difficulty in earning, but even in his last illness Blake's instinct forbade him to sacrifice even the appearance of independence. His "high, austere, and lonely way" he maintained to the end. Meantime the regular remittances from Linnell continued, while the Dante designs made slow progress. Of the hundred sketched, seven only were engraved at last.

George Cumberland also bought a copy of the Job series, and busied himself to find another purchaser. Blake, too, etched for Cumberland a card-plate with his name surrounded by a flight of spiritual figures. An angel with a sickle in his hand is prophetically among them, and Blake added his age to his name at the foot.

In April 1827 Blake writes to Linnell :

I go on without daring to count on futurity, which I cannot do without doubt and fear that ruin activity, and are the greatest hurt to an artist such as I am.

He was still absorbed in his work :

I am too much attached to Dante to think of anything else. I have proved the six plates, and reduced the fighting devils ready for the copper.

Linnell, too, tried to interest likely people in his friend's work, among them Ottley, who later made advances to Constable, and Chantrey, the founder of the Chantrey Bequest. He declined the designs for *Paradise Regained*, but bought for £20 a copy of the *Songs of Innocence*. Sir Thomas Lawrence purchased for £15 "The Wise and Foolish Virgins" and the "Dream of Queen Katherine", duplicates of those made for Butts. Blake also put finishing touches to his great design of the "Last Judgment", which, according to Smith, he would have sent to the Royal Academy had he lived till the following year.

The correspondence with Linnell closes with a note from Blake dated July 3, 1827, which may be given in full, for it is a summary of their relations :

Dear Sir, I thank you for the ten pounds you are so kind as to send me at this time. My journey to Hampstead

on Sunday brought on a relapse which has lasted till now. I find I am not so well as I thought ; I must not go on in my youthful style. However I am upon the mending hand to-day, and hope soon to look as I did ; for I have been yellow and accompanied by all the old symptoms.

He still worked in bed at the Dante drawings, and he made a coloured design of "The Ancient of Days" for Tatham. "After he had frequently touched upon it", to quote Smith's words, "and had frequently held it at a distance, he threw it from him, and with an air of exulting triumph exclaimed : 'There, that will do ! I cannot mend it.' " It had always been one of his favourite works. It was to a month the forty-fifth anniversary of his wedding, and, as his eye fell upon his wife, once more seizing his pencil he cried : "Stay as you are ! You have been ever an angel to me ; I will draw you", and immediately did.

On August 12 the end was felt to be coming, and Smith says that Mrs. Blake stood by him as he "composed and uttered songs to his Maker", at which he said : "My beloved, they are not mine. No ! they are not mine", adding that death would not prevent him from taking care of her. In reply to her question, he said that he would be buried in Bunhill Fields, and he wished the service to be that of the Church of England. In the evening his songs ceased, and he died, almost imperceptibly, at six o'clock the same day. One of his friends wrote : "Just before he died his countenance became fair, his eyes brightened, and he burst out singing of the things he saw in heaven. In truth, he died like a saint, as a person who was standing by him observed." This was Catherine Blake's opinion of her husband.

On the following Friday, August 17,<sup>f</sup> he was buried in the presence of his friends, Richmond and Calvert among them. Tatham had travelled ninety miles rather than be away. The grave being unpurchased was technically a common one, and in a few years was used again, so the world missed its last chance of showing Blake respect.

He left behind him a few friends, no debts, and the works that he had been unable to sell. Once more Linnell came to the rescue, and within a month Mrs. Blake was installed in Cirencester Place, till this was let. In less than a year she left to become house-keeper to Tatham, who continued to keep an eye on her when, as a semi-invalid, she moved to lodgings of her own in Upper Charlotte Street. The periodic disposal of Blake's drawings provided for her needs, and she was able to decline a present of £100 from Princess Sophia on the plea that she was not in present need of it. Within four years she too was dead, and all Blake's unsold work passed into Tatham's possession. Her only recorded complaint was that Mr. Blake was so little with her, though in the body they were never separated, for he was incessantly away in Paradise. She died in the arms of Mrs. Tatham on October 18, 1831, at the age of sixty-nine, and was buried beside her husband. Of Blake's family only his sister now was left. Beyond her appearance at Felpham she has left no mark on Blake's story. She is said to have lived long and to have died at last in great poverty.

Though there were several purchasers of Blake's works from his widow, a great number of plates and manuscripts passed at Mrs. Blake's death into Tatham's

hands. Tatham asserted that Blake himself on his death-bed looked to him as "a likely person to become the manager" of Mrs. Blake's affairs, and that she bequeathed to him everything that remained unsold. Linnell declared that Tatham produced no proof of this bequest. The matter was important to Blake's admirers, because Tatham became a convert to Irvingism and was possessed by religious scruples. These were known to Blake's other friends, and Edward Calvert, according to his son, "fearing some fatal *dénouement*, went to Tatham and implored him to reconsider the matter and spare the good man's precious works, notwithstanding which blocks, plates, drawings, and MSS., I understand, were all destroyed".

Mr. Arthur Symonds questions this, the received story, and, in support of the theory that Tatham sold more than he destroyed, quotes a letter from Tatham to W. M. Rossetti. In this letter, dated November 6, 1862, Tatham wrote: "I have sold Mr. Blake's works for thirty years." There is, then, still a chance that some may reappear, whether designs or examples of the epics and tragedies which Blake mentioned in one of his large generalisations to Crabb Robinson. All we can say with confidence is that Tatham is certainly responsible for their disappearance.



## CHAPTER XII

### BLAKE AND THE SUBLIME

As we look back upon the life and productions of this extraordinary man we are aware of a strange contrast. His life was disciplined, courageous, the complete expression of the great character that we know him to have been. All who were intimate with him agree on his simplicity, straightforwardness, and nobility. No act nor any personal word addressed to any of his friends or enemies is recorded to his discredit, and we feel that Mrs. Blake's assertion that he was an angel might be translated into "a saint" without rhetorical exaggeration. When we consider his difficulties, his strange upbringing, his continual discouragement by the world we wonder, admire, and reverence him. But when we turn to his writings, and to a lesser extent to his designs, we are startled by the contrast. Here achievement and failure, lucidity and extravagance, form and confusion are oddly mingled. It would be difficult to agree that his productions are as balanced as his life, for he is one of the few great artists whose life was more harmonious than his works. The finest express the energy of that life with the added glory that it is the secret of art to confer. The others startle us by their lack of the splendid balance which was the rock of the man's character.

Our knowledge of his circumstances helps us in part to explain this. The boy was apprenticed early to engraving, and his hand did not lose its native inspiration from the very strict discipline to which it was put. His mind received no discipline at all, but its natural energies were nourished on the incommensurable Swedenborgianism of his father; the Bible was the only literature he knew, and the atmosphere of heretical opinion in which he was brought up encouraged his mind to pick and choose quite uncritically from the odd books and works of art that came his way. Westminster Abbey was the school in which his boyish imagination was trained, and there is more than a joke in the saying of one of his biographers that the boy became "almost a Gothic monument himself". However little we may trust even a humane education to cultivate a commonplace imagination or mind, yet its value as a discipline for the mind is undeniable if the mind is already there. We find, as a rule, the force of education stronger than the force of character, and better designed to prune than to nourish talent. With the effect of his apprenticeship to engraving before us, it is difficult to deny that Blake possessed the very mind that would have gained by humanistic studies, and that the hysterical religious atmosphere of his home was bad for him. That he could learn from experience to control his energies his heroic life proves beyond dispute; and that his intelligence might have become as little indisciplined as his life or his graver, if the necessary training had been granted, seems a justifiable inference.

As it was, his abundant imagination, acting from the first in isolation, and with only eccentric religious

ideas on which to feed, was left to prey upon itself, and to make its own wilfulness the sole law of its being. This admitted, and remembering that Blake was one of the rare few who was a master of two arts, we can rather wonder that he left as much fine work as he did than lament its extraordinary, and sometimes gratuitous, imperfections. Indeed the practical bounds set to his outward energies, which he never attempted to disregard, probably transferred the currents that these repressed to his imaginative faculties. He indulged in an excessive idiosyncrasy of thought because so little other idiosyncrasy was allowed to him. Blake deserved every opportunity, including that of the criticism of minds equal and more cultivated than his own. He should have been well educated ; he should have travelled. With such chances a man of his independent spirit could have been trusted to make the most of them. Imagine Blake with Shelley's opportunities, and Shelley brought up as Blake was, and the influence of circumstances is apparent. Blake was fated to be a man who knew nothing but himself, whose imagination was mainly rich in inward treasures, who, in his most impressionable years, had learnt nothing which can be taught. Like all lonely minds, unfairly deprived of the generous food that his energy demanded, he paid the penalty of his starvation. He became a law unto himself. He made an idol of idiosyncrasy. He elevated his limitations into intellectual dogmas.

A great deal, then, of his mental agility is the disguised defence of his own weakness. Naturally an extreme man, he declared that truth existed only in extremes ; that art was nothing but inspiration ; that

exuberance was the equivalent of beauty ; that the remedy of excess was to make it more abundantly excessive. A great romantic born into an age when the classic tradition was withering into formalism, much of this protest was inevitable. With one so dogmatic it is difficult to deal critically unless we bear in mind his relation to his age, and make allowance for the reaction that he heralded. When this is overlooked, and it is easy to forget it in words so challenging, we are compelled to say Yes or No to each of his assertions and are either captivated or dismayed. His great lyrical gift of language, as remarkable in his prose as in his verse, is the literary virtue of his writings. Blake's manner is always convincing, his meaning not always. The consequence is that Blake remains the most inspiring and the most questionable of authors. Confronted by his lyric power of language, critical qualification seems dull. It is easy to accept, and tiresome to weigh, extreme assertions. A hundred years after his death the reaction from his long depreciation is at its height, and adulation threatens to become uncritical. Yet to exalt an extreme individualist into a cult would be to abandon literature to fanaticism. Let Blake be exalted as an inspiration and a seer. His apotheosis as a thinker would be extravagant.

The reason for his translation to a pinnacle can be explained. His character, name, and works were known and revered by very few in his lifetime. These disciples, as we have seen, were able men. They recorded their memories, and, gradually, one by one, his works began to be sought and preserved. But as late as 1863, when his life was first fully written,

practically none of his works was generally known. We may almost say that nothing was accessible, collected, or printed until nearly fifty years after his death, and only in the present year, 1926, have his complete writings been given to the world in bulk, and very many of his designs been reproduced in book form. In other words, Blake's works, with the sanction of an almost mythic reputation, have been issued with something of the excitement of new discoveries. His fame preceded their appearance. Thus, though he has been dead for a hundred years, posterity has had little time to pass judgement. Only now are we in the position in which the death of a great artist usually leaves us. The process which normally follows the death of a famous artist has been reversed in regard to William Blake. The reaction from his reputation has been turned into a reaction in his favour, and is strengthened by fifty years of neglect. Not for another fifty years will the world be fully at home with him. Even then he will be more than usually a figure of legend, and the literature growing round his writings will continue because of their obscurity. The precise value of his mythology will remain indeterminate however understood its details may come to be. In the prophetic books students of mysticism, religious minds, and literary critics possess a happy hunting-ground. Only a system devised by an unsystematic intelligence succeeds in eluding the verdict of criticism.

Having gathered the part that idiosyncrasy, circumstances, and posthumous reputation have played with his reputation, it remains to inquire for what his genius stands. In violent recoil from the academic tradition of his day, he is the egoist of art, and by temper a

romantic. He believed in energy, assertion, the subjectivity of ideas, and declared that this was the principle of Christianity. He is the apostle of the exception, and he desired to exalt the worship of the exception into a creed. Everything personal was his cultivation : everything in relation to other things was suspect to him. An admirable summary of his religious ideas, and his relation to Christian teaching, is given by Mr. Sturge Moore in *Art and Life* (pp. 201-3). In his theological aspect, he invented a heresy of the Holy Spirit, which, like an inverted Arian, he professed to be the whole Trinity in one. In art he measured performance by intensity, and placed vision, the imaginative faculty, so high that he desired to transcribe it literally, without even the means by which vision is communicable. Thus he invented symbols of his own, and his own intuitions had almost an objective reality to him because his mind had been saturated with Gothic forms in the Abbey, forms, works of art, which became to him eternal beings. It was the example of Swedenborg, whom he desired to surpass, which led him to invent a new mythology to embody substantially the story of the Fall and the regeneration of man by the imagination? That a mystic, to whom self-experience suffices, should have been an artist also is the surprising combination in Blake. In art he was at his best a great illustrator, chiefly of religious ideas, and with a magic and simplicity that makes his natural subjects exquisite transfigurations. In lyric poetry the same magic occurs to transfigure the simplest instinctive emotions, but in his poetry he accepts traditional forms, and he startles us by his vivid presentations of religious ideas

not by his invention of new metres.<sup>c</sup> Blake was a great lyric poet, a romantic artist, ever aspiring to an unobtainable height. The search for this height is the character of a certain type of art : not the classic, not even the romantic, but a peculiar type of the romantic, the sublime.

The term may detain us a little because it has temporarily lost its meaning to become a word of superlative praise. Before the Romantic Movement dominated our ways of thinking, the word sublime was more critically used. In the eighteenth century, and, indeed, traditionally, it was carefully distinguished from the beautiful. A scholar will inform one that it is characteristic of Christian not of Hellenic thought. Literally the word means up to the lintel, to the top of a tall hat. In anatomy it refers to the surface, the outward superficies of organic things. In medicine it means beyond, or below, the threshold of intellectual consciousness ; and, as this state of indefiniteness may be excited by as yet unrealised aspirations and instincts of great compulsive power, the sublime is readily identified with ecstasy or the indefinable quality of poetry. Thus it is a tantalising term for that which fascinates<sup>d</sup> but eludes, either because we are on the verge of its attainment or because we have lost a consciousness or memory that we would have kept. It may imply a goal ahead or an energy that has passed its zenith. This double meaning, the inspiring or the defective, is condensed in the proverb that between the sublime and the ridiculous there is but a step. The art, then, that is busy with aspiration, which carries the mind to something beyond itself, expresses the sublime, and thus is the romantic *in excelsis*. The art which is

content with the utmost that it can achieve, which is content with perfection, which prefers serenity to unrest, is the classical. Romantic art appeals primarily to the emotions : classic art to the emotions married to good sense.

The distinction is important to our understanding of Blake. Fénelon, who was both a religious man and an interesting critic, desired to make the sublime "so simple that all may understand it". Had it been possible for anyone to succeed in this attempt, we should have heard the last of the sublime, since its essence is to remain indefinable. The sublime, then, is a term that describes aspirations in the bud or achievements past their flower. Spring and autumn, adolescence and old age, sunrise and sunset are figures of the sublime. Architecture can be either noble or sublime, but even romantic architecture is not so sublime as a ruin.

That is the quality in a sentence, and to exalt the romantic to its sublime level, as Blake did, is to invite a literature in ruins. The pointed architecture of Christian cathedrals has been called sublime, and yet this architecture has been as justly called frozen mathematics as frozen music. The desire to reveal the stresses and strains by which the building is poised has been found in them no less than the spiritual aspiration which every sensitive eye beholds in them. Cross-vaulting has been compared to a visible network of gravitational forces no less than to "fingers joined in prayer". The building is a monument to science as well as feeling. In literature, in sublime literature, this discipline is rarely found. It is not found in Blake, and he, therefore, produced the ruins of a system of



philosophy. In dethroning a Urizen, who had usurped his province, Blake's mind capitulated to its whims. He sought to make the sublime the norm of artistic endeavour, and it is a relief to turn from his prophetic writings to his designs, because in design only had his hand and intelligence been disciplined.

The reader, then, who would view Blake critically will accept him as a fine lyrical poet, an inspiring writer of lyrical prose, a great coiner of aphorisms, and, unless he is specially drawn to them, will not feel bound to linger over the longer prophecies. He will discover that Blake is at his best when he is disciplined. He will return to the Job designs, to the "Last Judgment", the illustrations to Virgil, and, apart from these great achievements, he will accept the mass of incidental design as the product of a lyric colourist whose purity and brilliance of tone, whose exquisite fancy can be appreciated fully only by first-hand acquaintance with the originals, for they suffer the loss of half their magic even in the more careful reproductions. When we turn from the uneven work left by Blake to the heroic life of the man who made it, the conclusion to which we come is an old distinction : that his life was noble but his work sublime. The man, the artist, the mystic, the lyric poet form a complex appeal which makes it fatally easy to do more or less than justice to his several achievements ; and, if he still tantalises, inspires, and yet leaves us unsatisfied, and, it may be, disappointed, let us remember that to tantalise and to disappoint are the very qualities which distinguish sublime from classical art.

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